

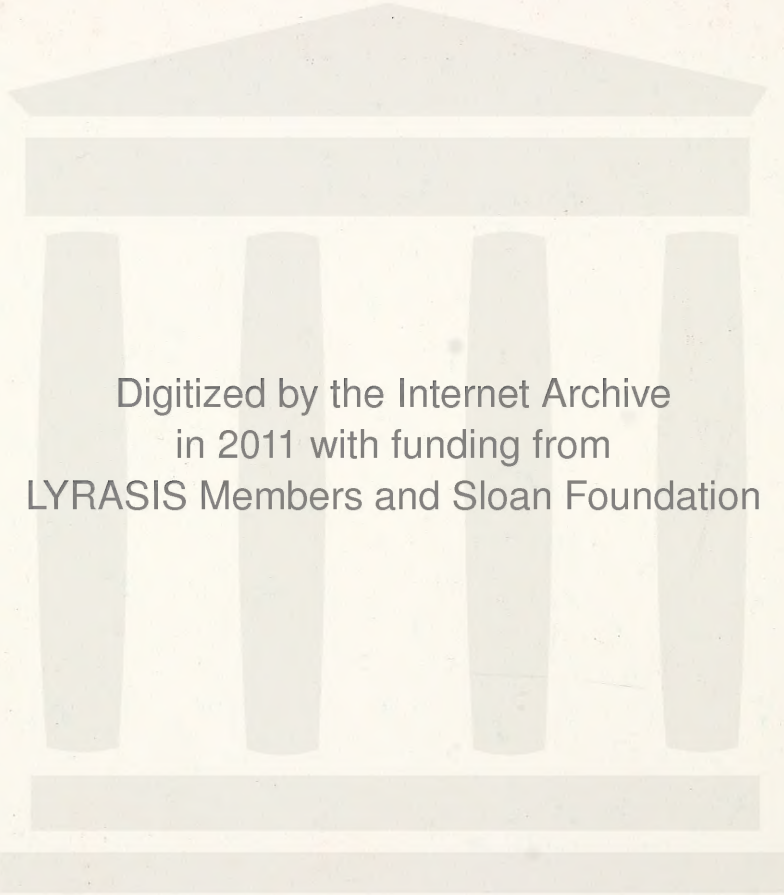
# *Spiritans Today*



*Cor unum  
et  
anima una*



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SPIRITANS  
TODAY  
No. 2

1983



# WE SPIRITANS

ALL FOR THE GREATER GLORY  
OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER  
IN OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST  
THROUGH HIS HOLY SPIRIT  
IN UNION WITH THE HOLY HEART OF MARY

(Title-page of the Provisional Rule)  
Francis Mary Paul Libermann





# CONTENTS

Foreword : An International Spiritan Month at Gentinnes . . . .	5
Preface : Rev. Fr Frans Timmermans, Superior General . . . .	11
<b>SPIRITAN VOCATION</b> . . . . .	15
"Consider your situation" . . . . .	15
Our Story . . . . .	15
Foundation Charism . . . . .	17
<b>Chapter I : CONSECRATION AND MISSION</b> . . . . .	19
<b>I - CONSECRATION</b> . . . . .	19
A - Creation and Baptismal Consecration . . . . .	19
B - Spiritan Consecration . . . . .	19
a) In the Light of God's Word . . . . .	20
b) Libermann's Vision . . . . .	22
C - Our Common Spiritan Consecration . . . . .	25
D - Consecration as Priests . . . . .	28
<b>II - A MISSION OF TOTAL SALVATION TO ABANDONED SOULS</b> . . . . .	31
A - The Spiritan Mission in Our History . . . . .	31
B - Who Are the Most Abandoned Today? . . . . .	35
C - Multifform Mission . . . . .	38
<b>Chapter II : VOWS AND COMMUNITY</b> . . . . .	41
<b>I - VOWS</b> . . . . .	41
A - A Gift the Church Authenticates. . . . .	41
B - Chastity . . . . .	42
C - Poverty . . . . .	44
D - Obedience. . . . .	46
E - Conclusion . . . . .	47
<b>II - COMMUNITY.</b> . . . .	49
A - The Community of Jesus' Apostles . . . . .	49
B - Fr Libermann and Apostolic Community . . . . .	50
C - The Spiritan Community . . . . .	54
D - Community Discernment . . . . .	57

E - Spiritan Associates . . . . .	58
F - Inculturation . . . . .	59
Chapter III : SPIRITUALITY . . . . .	61
I - OUR FOUNDERS' COMMON INSPIRATION . . . . .	61
II - THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CLAUDE FRANCIS POULLART DES PLACES . . . . .	67
III - THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN . . . . .	73
A - Experiencing the Power of Grace . . . . .	74
B - Purification . . . . .	76
C - Docility to the Spirit of God . . . . .	79
D - Dark Night . . . . .	84
E - Union . . . . .	87
a) At the Service of the Church . . . . .	88
b) The Holy Heart of Mary . . . . .	88
c) Practical Union . . . . .	90
IV - A THREEFOLD CONCLUSION . . . . .	97
Chapitre IV : APOSTOLATE . . . . .	99
I - THE SPIRIT OF PENTECOST . . . . .	99
II - THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS . . . . .	102
III - EVANGELIZATION . . . . .	107
IV - APOSTOLIC ZEAL . . . . .	110
V - THE PASCHAL MYSTERY . . . . .	113
Afterword . . . . .	119



## FOREWORD

### AN INTERNATIONAL SPIRITAN MONTH IN GENTINNES, BELGIUM

From August 1st to 28th, 1983, an international Spiritan month was held at the Kongolo Memorial, the Centre of Spirituality and Missionary Promotion of our Belgian confreres in Gentinnes. The general theme was a reflection in faith and prayer on *our Spiritan call*. Out of necessity, and in order to encourage a full exchange of ideas among those present — notwithstanding our different approaches and the weighty problem of translation (which we accomplished with our own resources) — we limited, at least for this first occasion, the number of participants, all of whom paid their own way to Gentinnes. A dozen Spiritans from a dozen countries took part, as well as a Holy Ghost Sister, and the two members of the Animation and Research Centre et the Generalate. Five more confreres came by invitation to present papers and take part in the discussions. Each participant had prepared a paper beforehand on a given subject and had had it translated. Thus every morning all had the working-paper of the day in their personal file in the language of their choice, English or French.

The pedagogical approach was twofold: on the one hand, to share our common Spiritan vocation in the richness of our diverse cultures, and on the other to unify and improve our promotion of Spiritan spirituality throughout the provinces and mission areas. This approach meant silence and well-celebrated liturgy as well as discussions.

We had two basic sources to attend to: first, sacred Scripture, the documents of Vatican II, contemporary theology and the writings and lives of our founders; then the living tradition of our Congregation and all that the Lord's Spirit calls us to live today in conformity with the



signs of our times. We considered these two sources essential for arriving at the Spiritan reality.

It took time to find unity in all our diversity. We were diverse in age, training, culture, apostolic experiences, even in the way we regarded the Church's mission! Nevertheless our unusual community ship eventually reached cruising speed with a fraternal joy that stemmed from the Spirit who, like the wind, 'blows where it will'. The welcome extended to us by the Gentinnes community itself, and the prayers of the older members of that community, had not a little to do with the *Cor unum et Anima una* that developed among us.

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This special issue of *Spiritans Today* offers our Spiritan confreres a synthesis of our reflections. It proved impossible to edit the communications in full. We had to group the ideas around the main themes under discussion, sometimes add, sometimes subtract, in such a way that, in the long run, if the general inspiration of the group is safeguarded, and if the manuscript was checked by a number of the participants, this definitive text remains our responsibility alone at the Centre. On the other hand, interested confreres, particularly those involved in promoting Spiritan spirituality, may procure one or more of the conferences in full, in English or French, from the Centre. Finally, we hope that these documents will be useful for Spiritan retreats or other Spiritan months, such as we hope to organize again.

As it stands, this synthesis may appear skeletal, deprived of the life of faith and charity that went into its making. But we would like to think that each Spiritan, some quiet evening or recollection day, will be reminded of his call on leafing through these pages where the Lord awaits him as he awaited the Samaritan woman at the well: 'If you knew the gift of God'. That could be anywhere — in a basic community in Latin America, in an African village, at work among migrants or lepers, after a long day of study or teaching, in the anonymous crowd of a big city or at the hidden service of an office-desk, crushed by heavy pastoral duties or witnessing to Christ in a Moslem environment, isolated at an outpost of first evangelization or harassed by the gigantic misery all around, at sick-beds or among youth-groups, in full apostolic flight or sick in hospital, as young novice or elderly retired

missionary, wherever the Lord has placed him and still needs and loves him.

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\* \* \*

The list of titles and authors of the Gentinnes papers for the four weeks of the Spiritan month follows.

\* \* \*



## FIRST WEEK

## CONSECRATION AND MISSION

Introduction to the Spiritan Vocation

Consecration in an Institute of Apostolic Life, by Fr Cornelius van der Poel, of Holland

Priesthood in the Holy Ghost Congregation, by Fr Myles L. Fay, of Ireland

Living One's Consecration, by Fr Alphonse Gilbert, of St Pierre et Miquelon

A Mission of Total Salvation, by Fr Alphonse Gilbert

Who Are the Most Abandoned Today?, by Fr Edmond Ndzana, of Cameroun, by Fr Gerald Connerotte, of Belgium, by Fr Daniel Macha, of Tanzania

## SECOND WEEK

## VOWS AND COMMUNITY

Vows for an Apostolic Life, by Fr Alphonse Gilbert

The Vocation of the Spiritan Brother Today, by Fr Frank Meenan, of the U.S.A.

Spiritn Life: Apostolate and Religious Life, by Fr Jean-Claude Pariat, of Switzerland

The Spiritan Community, by Fr José Pires, of Portugal

Spiritn Lay Associates, written contribution by Fr Henry J. Koren, of Holland

Community Life in the Context of Igbo Culture, by Fr Donatus Odiegwu, of Nigeria



## THIRD WEEK

## SPIRITUALITY

- Fr Libermann's Spirituality, by Fr Bernard Tenailleau, of the French Seminary, Rome
- The Heart of Mary as a Devotional Ideal in our Congregation, by Fr Michael O'Carroll, of Ireland
- The Communion of Saints and Libermann, by Fr Bernard de Lépinay, of France
- The Holy Spirit in the Spiritan Tradition, by Fr Paul Sigrist, of Fribourg, Switzerland
- God's Rain and Artificial Rain, by Fr Bernard Kelly, of Canada
- Claude Francis Poullart des Places, a Life-experience under the Breath of the Spirit, written contribution by Fr Maurice Gobeil, of Canada

## FOURTH WEEK

## APOSTOLATE

- The Mission Today and What Libermann's Sons Can Bring to it, by Fr Heliodoro Machado, of Spain
- The Spirit of a Rule for Apostles, by Fr François Nicolas, of France
- African Spirituality and Libermannian Mystique, by Fr Henry Gravrand, of Senegal
- A Statement on Apostolic Work, by Fr Gaétan Renaud, of Canada
- A Statement on Apostolic Life, by Sister Anne-Marie Donguy, Holy Ghost Sisters, of the Congo



## PREFACE

by Rev. Fr Frans Timmermans, Superior General

### *'Spe Gaudentes'*

Gentennes is a little village in the middle of the Walloon countryside of Belgium. It boasts an old parish church, a few houses and a *château* that was transformed into a Holy Ghost junior seminary at the turn of the century. *Spe Gaudentes*, Rejoicing in Hope, is inscribed on the coat-of-arms over the main door. For many Spiritans this house has become the symbol of their missionary call; the giving of oneself unto the end, as a response to God's unfathomable love, in imitation of Jesus, Apostle and Missionary. In front of the beautiful chapel commemorating the missionary-martyrs of Kongolo there is placed the striking figure of a missionary on his knees, his hands wide-open in a gesture of surrender, waiting not for the mortal blow but for his meeting with the Father. *Mors in nobis operatur, vita autem in vobis*, reads the inscription in big bronze letters on the base of the statue.

In this symbolic spot that witnesses as few others do to the hope that is born of the cross, eighteen Spiritans assembled during the month of August to draw from the wells whence the Spiritan adventure first flowed and continues to flow. I had the pleasure of joining them for the last days of their meeting. I felt happy and at ease. This was not merely a group of specialists examining the fruits of their researches, it was a group of brothers and a sister celebrating together in thankful joy.

Summaries and minutes can never express what is lived and shared throughout a long period of papers and discussions, sometimes hard and tiring but ripened in prayer. Yet this document goes a long way towards it. I was surprised and delighted – surprised at so much research hitherto unexplored by most of us, delighted to see summarized in simple, evocative style what constitutes the common spirit of the Congregation, the reservoir of life of our wider community.

Spiritans, wherever they may be, easily recognize one another by



this 'something', so often indefinable, grasped instinctively, shared naturally. How often have I not heard, 'it is something you cannot define, you have to live it'. This is partly true; but an intuition, especially an intuition that sets itself up as identifying the very community, must also be capable of being expressed; otherwise it will remain on the surface and, as experience proves, be lost. Only when it is brought to consciousness, acknowledged and interiorized in both mind and heart will it become a source of inspiration, dynamic force and hope.

*'Spe Gaudentes'*. The words strike me every time I visit Gentinnes, which I like to do. This hope became more living for me according as our call, mine and yours, emerged from these pages. Those who live the gospel throw light on it. Following the path of the Kongo martyrs and many more Spiritans, we reach the highway of our founders, especially Fr Libermann, who leads us to the heart of the gospel. Suddenly we are confronted by a call addressed quite particularly to us, made to our measure: what God wants us to be in the Church! And since the gospel is at stake, this is not a relic of the past from an archeological dig. Every word of the gospel is illuminated today by the relevance of what we are facing. This illumination gives coherence and allows us to see what God is asking of us. Behind the figure of the missionary with open hands in front of the Gentinnes chapel Libermann's figure is silhouetted, and Poullart des Places's and Jesus Christ's.



It is my hope and prayer that these pages will help you, all of you, to grasp this call better, to welcome it joyfully and generously, and to respond to it 'with open hands', unreservedly. This will mean conversion. I have often told you about the strong feeling I have that we, this Spiritan community in general, are on the verge of a threshold to be crossed. There is *urgency* about this, now is the time! In our analyses in the General Council we see indicative signs of this quite clearly. Already 'there is a move on'! Profound and sometimes painful changes on the level of our missionary work have often been purifications. The true meaning of the missionary call can shine forth in a fresh light when one is despoiled of everything. Trials have always been occasions of conversion. New ideas coming to birth both in the young Churches and in the older provinces have occasioned new responses that are as loyal as the old. God has given us confreres in the Churches we helped to found — it is the great joy of missionaries to be gratified by a posterity. But more is involved, new challenges whose consequences, stakes and demands we have hardly glimpsed! God is still giving us confreres in the older provinces, thus ensuring the future. Signs are not lacking. Many confreres and communities have undertaken a programme of conversion and renewal. This renewal will pass by way of our sources. I have been struck by how many people tell me they have found a re-discovery of their call a help to setting out afresh, '*spe gaudentes*'.

But if I say that the Congregation stands at a threshold, it means that 'the main body of troops' has not stepped forward and over, it is hesitating. The price of passing over is nothing less than a genuine conversion that will bear us along to this decisive step, this irretrievable gift that these pages speak of. There is no lack of good-will or sincere desire. Confreres sometimes complain that the Congregation leaves them to themselves. Many have to battle on alone in their difficulties and find little or no inspiration outside their community. In these movements of varied spirituality, who will lead us to the well in our own yard? Who will help us to find the treasure buried in our own field?

I hope that this research will give rise to true masters of spirituality, spiritual guides, leaders filled with the spirit of our founders. I wish the apostolic experiences we are undergoing could be clarified, that we could be helped to interpret the signs that surround us in the light of our Spiritan heritage, so as to draw inspiration and courage from them, revivify our faith, and stake out 'a Spiritan way of holiness'. Thus some simple flexible arrangements can be made little by

little which will enable us all to respond better to the needs of individuals and communities, for this renewal at the deepest level.

Gentilles has been an important step along the way, as the present publication evidences. I express the wish that you read it and meditate on it, and share the riches you discover here with your brothers, so that you too may be encouraged, '*spe gaudentes*'.

Frans TIMMERMANS  
Superior General



## SPIRITAN VOCATION

### *'Consider your situation'*

*'Brothers, you are among those called; consider your situation' (I Cor 1 : 26 New American Bible)*

Each Christian has a personal vocation in the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Chosen in him before the foundation of the world (Eph 1 : 4), predestined to become, with him, adopted children (Eph 1 : 5), Christians receive his Spirit in order to be his witnesses (Acts 1 : 8). This is a gratuitous, mysterious vocation, whose roots are deep in the mystery of God's infinite love. Every subsequent vocation — religious life, priesthood, special mission — is grafted onto this primary baptismal vocation; it too is the expression of a particular divine choice, it expresses a particular divine act of love made known by a choice gift of God. May God *'enlighten your innermost vision that you may know the great hope to which he has called you'* (Eph 1 : 18). Any reflection on our call will always bring us back to this generosity of God, which is so overwhelming that our first sentiment is one of gratitude, expressed spontaneously in prayer. As the different aspects of our vocation take shape before our eyes, in fraternal dialogue and prayer, we say with St Paul: *'Praised be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ'* (Eph 1 : 3).

### *Our Story*

The Spiritans were born in 1703, when the first community of *Claude-Francis Poullart des Places* assembled on the feast of Pentecost. He was the first to receive this personal gift of the Holy Spirit for the growth of the Church that St Paul calls 'charism', with all the fulness of divine favour that the Greek origin of the word entails. His charism as founder was to initiate and head a seminary and a Society to

help 'poor scholars' to receive adequate priestly formation with a view to disinterested service of the most abandoned. His followers, both collaborators and successors, were called Priests of the Holy Spirit or Placists, and received the same gift, that of training priests '*parati ad omnia*' for the lowliest positions in the Church, those that no one wanted. By way of consequence, the same gift marked the life and apostolate of about one thousand 'Spiritans' whom they trained. Their special mission was 'to bring the gospel to the poor and even to those without the faith', both in France and in distant lands, down to the year 1848.

In a way at first parallel and then convergent, this free gift was also bestowed remarkably on *Francis Libermann*. His charism as a founder would be to bring salvation, in all meanings of the word, to the most abandoned everywhere, but in an altogether special way to the Black races of Africa. His followers, the Fathers and Brothers of the Holy Heart of Mary Society, animated by the same zeal, would be the pioneers of the missionary apostolate in Africa and the French Colonies from 1841 until 1848.

After the providential fusion of the two Societies into one, under the title of Congregation of the Holy Ghost and of the Holy Heart of Mary (1848), the same gift of God has enriched the hearts of thousands of Spiritans (the generic name that the priests and Brothers of the Congregation would bear henceforth, as Fr Libermann had foreseen) down to our day; of diverse origins, languages and cultures, they man the outposts of the most abandoned areas. This gift and spirit makes brothers of all Spiritans wherever they are, from Brazil to Tanzania, from Canada to Madagascar. It is always a welcome surprise to feel so different and so close.

What strikes an attentive observer of the development of the Institute from its beginnings in 1703 down to today is the astonishing unity of God's plan throughout history, and the living permanence of the fundamental Spiritan charism with a diversity of manifestations in the apostolic fields of its endeavours. This has been so in the midst of historical and social upheavals as well as during internal tensions. The great Spiritan historian, Fr Adolphe Cabon, wrote at the centenary of the fusion in 1949: 'Among the many providential affinities that were preparing this fusion for a long time, I would signal out that which existed between the devotions of the two Congregations, devotion to the Holy Spirit and devotion to the holy heart of Mary'. The city of Rennes in Brittany was God's chosen spot for bringing the two founders to their decisions. Claude Francis Poullart des Places made his

life decision at Rennes: 'My divine Saviour, I have come to let you have your way... I will make you known to hearts that do not know you... and you will be eternally praised!' (1701). Francis Libermann heard the interior call at Rennes on October 28, 1839: 'God has given orders, I have taken my resolution!'

### *Foundation Charism*

Each Institute brings its own vocation into the Church as a gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 45; *Perfectae Caritatis* 1,2) and acknowledged as authentic by the hierarchy. 'The charism of founders' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 11) is revealed as 'an experience of the Spirit', handed on to their followers to be lived by them, protected, deepened, constantly developed by perpetual growth in harmony with the Body of Christ. 'It is for this reason that the distinctive character of various religious institutes is preserved and fostered by the Church' (*Lumen Gentium* 44). This 'distinctive character' entails a particular style of holiness and apostolate which starts a definite tradition, in such a way that its objective elements can be suitably analysed (*Mutuae Relationes* 11). Our own two founders were gifted by the Lord with special favours which, as such, cannot be handed on. Their personality, and hence their spirituality, were conditioned by their education, the current ideologies of their time, a whole historical set of circumstances which no longer obtain. In this sense we cannot copy them or use them to serve our own ideas. But the fundamental charism has to be constantly deepened and clarified, that which the Holy Spirit prophetically gave them and continues to give their followers. 'The specific charismatic note of any Institute demands, both of the founder and of his disciples, a continual examination regarding: fidelity to the Lord; docility to his Spirit; intelligent attention to circumstances and an outlook cautiously directed to the signs of the times; the will to be part of the Church; the awareness of subordination to the sacred hierarchy; boldness of initiatives; constancy in the giving of self; humility in bearing with adversities' (*Mutuae Relationes*, 12).

In the renewal that marks the Church today it is striking to hear Spiritans remark on the power of the Spirit to renew them in their first vocation, see them put their finger on their fundamental charism, vibrant and fragile at the same time, but still full of hope, a gift of God of which they are the depositories and for which they are responsible



in the Church. Our task is to clarify this charism. By the intercession of the holy heart of Mary and of all the confreres who have gone before us in the furrow traced by our founders and their first companions, we will ask the Holy Spirit to guide us 'to all truth' (Jn 16 : 13), to understand this gift, which came from him and which he entrusts to us as a precious talent, not to be buried but on the contrary to be made brilliant and fruitful.

We will follow the plan of the Spiritan month we lived together: consecration and mission, vows and community, spirituality, apostolate.

## Chapter I

# CONSECRATION AND MISSION

## I – CONSECRATION

### A – CREATION AND BAPTISMAL CONSECRATION

To reflect seriously about consecration is to recall the sacred origin of all creation. Every created being has its origin in God and proclaims by its very existence God's power and majesty. Creation is a word of God; *'God said'*, and the object was. Creating, God spoke a word of love, he extended himself; then, by creating the human being, God extended himself into a created reality which somehow shared his own personal nature: *'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'* (Gen 1 : 26). In baptism we pass over to another level. Making us share Christ's life, this sacrament has us enter the new creation. *'You must put on that new man created in God's image, whose justice and holiness are born of truth'* (Eph 4 : 24). *'Baptism is indeed a true consecration, or rather it is the fundamental consecration. It incorporates the common relationship to God, which results from creation, into a different sort of relationship which is incomparably more intimate and closer. It consecrates the Christian in a totally new way'* (*Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique*, vol. IIB, p. 1577). All forms of consecration in the Church are grafted onto baptismal consecration, they are meant to bring it to full flowering or to favour an aspect of its ecclesial fruitfulness.

### B – SPIRITAN CONSECRATION

We have deliberately chosen this expression to emphasise the unity of our consecration in an Institute of consecrated apostolic life strongly oriented towards the missions, such as our founders have marked it, especially Fr Libermann, and such as God's Holy Spirit is bringing our Spiritan confreres to realize.

If each Institute of apostolic consecrated life receives the same impulse from the Holy Spirit to achieve the eternal plan of the Father's love for all people, it is no less true that each also embodies a particular spirit of this loving plan and mirrors forth the variety of God's gifts. Understood thus, Spiritan consecration is original, splendid and dynamic all at once; we will take a closer look at it in the light of God's word and Libermann's vision.

#### a) *In the Light of God's Word*

Throughout the Bible and salvation-history God, infinitely free in his love, often chooses to join people to himself in an altogether special way, to entrust them with a mission linked to a covenantal personal relationship. God takes the initiative, in his mysterious loving plan, before the person is born; he consecrates those he chooses, in order to lead them into his mystery and make them witnesses of his covenant. He did this with the prophets. *'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I dedicated you; a prophet to the nations I appointed you'* (Jer 1 : 5). God's initiative implies that he is taken over for a mission, *'to root up and to tear down, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant'* (Jer 1 : 10). The consecrated person is not withdrawn from the world; he is sent into the world to combat iniquity and promote holiness. The psalmist uses many words for God's actions. *'Behind me and before, you hem me in and rest your hand upon me'* (Ps 138 : 5). The chosen one feels the need to belong to God. God provokes this desire, and the interior torture if it is resisted. He expects a free loving response to his loving gift. *'You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped; you were too strong for me, and you triumphed'* (Jer 20 : 7).

To surrender to God is the logical response, but a person can feel his weakness and incapacity, like Jonas, and fear the mission he receives. Jeremiah said in his anguish:

I said to myself, I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it (Jer 20 : 9).

In the New Testament, the same initiatives of God and calls and consecrations to a mission take place. *'He then went up the mountain and summoned the men he himself had decided on, who came and*



joined him. He names twelve as his companions whom he would send to preach the good news' (Mk 3:13). 'Come after me' (Mk 1:17). He appointed them after praying. 'Father, all those you gave me' (Jn 17:24), he said, speaking of them. His glance at Nathanael — 'I saw you under the fig-tree' (Jn 1:48) — is an echo of the Father's eternal choice. They did not yet know there was a gospel to preach, they simply felt loved by him. 'Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of eternal life' (Jn 6:67). They belonged to Jesus: 'It was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you' (Jn 15:16). The 'follow me' calls for complete self-offering, in order to be 'set apart' and consecrated. They will come to realize that mission is inscribed into consecration. Jesus is the Anointed of the Father, and therefore the 'Envoy'. In his last prayer, Jesus said, 'I consecrate myself for their sakes now, that they may be consecrated in truth... Consecrate them by means of your truth' (Jn 17:19-17). 'The sanctification of the disciple in truth is always a sharing in the life of the Son in his relation to the Father' (Ignace de la Potterie, *Vivre dans la Verité*, p. 756).

'Doing the will of him who sent me and bringing his work to completion is my food' (Jn 4:34). Fidelity to his Father's will will lead him to sacrifice. 'Obediently accepting even death, death on a cross. Because of this God highly exalted him... Jesus Christ is Lord' (Ph. 2:8-11). Jesus brings life to people by doing his Father's will; that is their salvation, as original sin was disobedience. Jesus' obedience is the expression of his Sonship. The Spirit enables us to say, 'Jesus is Lord'; his passover opened the flood-gates of divine love.

The Father calls other people to continue Jesus' redemptive work, by being sons like him, consecrated and sent out. God's call is always a sign of special love. If people respond, God puts his seal on them; 'you are mine for ever'; 'I will be with you all days'. Then, like Moses at the burning bush, they receive a mission. 'Consecration is a divine act, a covenant of mutual love and fidelity, contracted for the glory of God, the happiness of the consecrated person and the world's salvation... Inevitably, consecration entails mission. They are two sides of the same reality' (Essential Elements of Church Teaching on Consecrated Life, *Documentation Catholique*, October 2, 1983). 'To consecrate ourselves' is our sharing in the action of God who consecrates. By baptismal consecration we are called to put all our energies into growing in divine sonship, becoming 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world'. Religious apostolic consecration disposes a person to go to the limit in the demands of the evangelical counsels so that the Lordship of Jesus to the praise of the Father's glory may be

extended. Around the apostle the kingdom of God will grow. '*Open your eyes and see, the fields are shining for harvest!*' (Jn 4 : 35).

The apostle's vocation and consecration are a double call: to grow in intimacy with God, and to pursue an apostolic mission that transcends his person. This mission will mean a precise activity, visible, limited to certain persons, places and things. But it also means belonging to the Father, loving obedience, redemptive offering, so that Christ can work out his own mission received from the Father. The first the apostle exercises 'to the nearest of the furthest', the second goes beyond time and space and the weakness of the instrument (Acts 9 : 15), so that the liberating passover can be accomplished in human history. '*As the Father has sent me I also send you*' (Jn 20 : 21).

#### b) *Libermann's Vision*

Libermann's *Commentary on St John's Gospel* shows the grasp he had of Scripture and in particular of St John's Gospel, where the person of Jesus is transparently obedient to the word, mission and action of the Father who sent him. What we call Libermann's vision is precisely his extraordinary intuition of relating the apostle's mission to that of Jesus-Apostle or Jesus who was sent. The actual expression, Jesus-Apostle, is found in only one passage of *Hebrews* (3 : 1), but the word *apostellein*, to send, is regularly used by St John with reference to the sending of Jesus or his disciples. Jesus defines himself as '*he whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world*' (Jn 10 : 36). He is the Father's envoy — that one word explains his mission. He is always aware of being the Son and of having a mission to accomplish. Jesus has an envoy's mentality, 'the calmness of one who knows that he does not act of his own accord but as he has been told. . . His power and authority derive from an absolute power and authority. . . He has great peace, courage in adversity, and perseverance, since everything relates quietly to his given mission' (Carlo Martini, *Bulletin UISG*, no. 56, p. 29).

'*As the Father has sent me, I also send you*' (Jn 20 : 21). The comparison is direct and immediate. Fr Libermann writes:

**Jesus sends us as he was sent; our mission is his. It is he who lives and suffers in those he sends, who draws souls to God his Father and communicates his graces to them through those he sends. But so that Jesus may live in his envoys, and do all things in and through them, they in turn must live in him, be**

united to him in their life, sufferings and apostolic activity. Otherwise, they are envoys of Jesus Christ only in figure and not in reality... Our whole mission resembles his (ES 374).

The apostle is invited to be serene and assured, as one who knows he is sent. He will have to suffer, but he will stay united to Jesus as Jesus was to his Father; he will conduct both his immediate and his universal mission in union with him, becoming more and more a son and redeemer in Jesus.

Unable to transmit the incommunicable, he has put at our disposal everything that could be given, by living in us and communicating the mission he received from his Father... *Qui videt me videt et Patrem...* Jesus in turn sends us as he was sent himself, and he wishes that those who see us see him in us, just as the Father was seen in him, and this by the holiness of our lives, by their resemblance to his and by our union with him (ES 376).

All these texts are from 1851, some months before Fr Libermann died, and so they constitute a sacred heritage of his thought.

Jesus says he was doing the works of his Father; likewise our works should be those of him who sent us, and we should be active according to his grace. Jesus' teaching is not his own but his Father's; not a word did he say that did come from his Father. *Quae audiui a Patre, haec loquor.* Our teaching too, and all our words in general, should bear the stamp of Jesus' spirit (*ibid*).

'What I just did was to give you an example; as I have done, so you must do' (Jn 13:15). If Jesus spent three years training his apostles, it was to teach them to pursue his mission by watching him in action.

Jesus wished to show his apostles and all those he would send to souls, until the end of the world, how they should live personally, how they should act with people, speak, suffer and work for the salvation of souls... He is the model of those consecrated to God for the apostolate... He is our model, to make us models for others... A copy intended to serve as model has to be perfect (ES 380).



It becomes clear that Fr Libermann thought of the Spiritan as primarily an apostle, who reproduces with his brothers, over a lifetime, the journeying method of Jesus and the apostles for the salvation of souls, especially the most abandoned. 'The apostolic life contains the perfection of our Lord's life, on which ours is modelled' (Gloss, p. 7). The apostolate, says the Rule of 1849, is the end of the Congregation. 'To be dedicated to the salvation of sinners by an altogether apostolic life' (ND X 450), our eyes never losing sight of Jesus, model of the apostle.

**The apostolic life is the life of all love and holiness that the Son of God lived on earth to save and sanctify souls, by which he was continually sacrificed to his Father's glory for the world's salvation (ND X 55).**

He himself preached the good news, he opened the hearts of people of all social classes to the knowledge and love of God, '*he went about doing good*', he prayed, he suffered. But, far beyond those he visibly reached by his word, he begot souls for God by his union with his Father and the offering of his life. The Spiritan apostle does the same thing, he is a witness to Jesus Christ among the neediest people and a saviour for them. He has to be holy.

**Like Jesus, who was sent by his Father and lived for his Father, likewise you, who have been sent by him, must live for him in the spirit of his holiness. Jesus Christ your Saviour sanctified himself and sanctified his sufferings for the salvation of souls, and thus he begot them in pain and sanctified them in truth. The holiness of Jesus Christ must reside in the missionary, a holiness which ought to be grounded in his heart and reproduce itself in his activity and sufferings. Thus after the example of Jesus Christ he brings forth souls for God in truth because he communicates the Saviour's life which is in himself (ND XIII 405).**

Fr Libermann was given a particular grace to understand our vocation in the light of God. This is what we mean by 'Libermann's vision'. In the history of the Church he is one of the few founders who was able to offer the *mystique*, the spirituality, to support the call to a special work. He always treats of this with the keenness and enthusiasm of a seer, '*as seeing him who is invisible*' (Heb 11 : 27).

**I would like to set this down on every page I write. A missionary would does not work seriously and constantly at his own sanctification makes himself unworthy of this important apostolic grace and blameworthy before the souls he should have been saving. But if he sets to work seriously he will infallibly sanctify himself and many souls at the same time (ES 421).**

In the same missionary spirit, he sees this vocation as ‘the greatest benefit God can grant a creature’. At first glance the expression seems exaggerated, but not for those who have grown in likeness to Jesus, Apostle of the Father, willing to be led by his Holy Spirit. Today when this same Spirit is giving new life and launching us into a mysterious future of apostolic fruitfulness, the statement will appear to many Spiritans to confirm what they already experience: an astonishing intimacy with the Father in Jesus Christ, and a closeness to the mystery of the Lord’s death and resurrection so that his Lordship may be acknowledged and praised by all.

**Recall that our vocation is the greatest benefit God can grant a creature, and that this benefit calls for a holiness proportionate to the plan of the divine mercy that calls and to the vocation to which it calls. Without this holiness, we would be unworthy of God’s special choice, destroy his merciful plans and cheapen a glorious vocation that raises us above all creatures (ES 367).**

#### C – OUR COMMON SPIRITAN CONSECRATION

‘Three things constitute the spiritual condition of the Congregation: community life, the apostolate and the religious spirit; the third should be the soul of the other two’ (*Provisional Rule*, ND II 259).

The Gloss comments:

**The apostolate is the end of the Congregation; community life is the means for us to reach this end, but the religious spirit is the principle to make it living and active (since the end is quite supernatural, the very glory of God).**

So our Spiritan consecration is an apostolic consecration (the preferable term, emphasizing the divine initiative) or a consecration to the apostolate (a term that emphasizes our sharing in God’s gift); it is also

a religious consecration, in the sense that 'the religious spirit' (belonging wholly to the Father, in Jesus' footsteps) permeates it through and through. Religious values are integrated into apostolic activity by a process of indivisible symbiosis in such a way that the apostle will live a unified life totally dedicated to the apostolate, in union with Jesus, the envoy and the 'religious' of the Father ('He is the only real religious; all others are so through him' (ND XIII 708)). 'This is a realistic, existential integration, bringing everything to bear on the apostolate in its two essential dimensions of personal witness and efficacious activity to proclaim the content of the Good News' (J. M. R. Tillard, *La règle spiritaine des origines*, *Spiritus* 1968, p. 328). Communion between the person of the apostle and the person of Jesus-Apostle is the secret of this dynamic and dynamizing unity.

**The vows the apostolic person takes have supernatural effects, in such a way that the sacrifice he makes of himself is immediately complete, since God puts the stamp of grace on it. It is as if God said: 'You come to give yourself to me. Very well, I accept you. Now you will no longer have to think about yourself, I will use you for others, according as seems good to me. By doing my will in this way you will become holy, by working for the salvation of others.'** (ND XIII 708).

These fine words of Fr Libermann come from one of his last talks with the novices at Notre-Dame du Gard in April 1851. All the elements of our Spiritan vocation are mentioned: our apostolic commitment, God's initiative in taking possession of us, total oblation, the double aspect of our call: the call to holiness and the call to the salvation of others.

All Spiritans are consecrated in this way. This consecration might be called the heart of our unity. By it, we are all brothers, all coresponsible in solidarity and service. Some are also priests, exercising an ecclesial charge in various ministries, and some are 'at the junction between human and ecclesial realities, between the kingdom of people and the kingdom of God'. John Paul II, who used those words on January 12, 1980 to those whom he called 'lay religious', also said to them: 'By your material tasks which determine the smooth operating of the whole community, by your apostolic spirit and service of your brother priests, by your presence in the world of education, work, technology, you are called to exercise a link-function within your respective religious families with a view to a greater organic unity, as also in the



external world of professions and work, where you can play an important role in bringing these areas into contact with the Church'.

Among Spiritans the Brothers are first of all — as they have been in the past — marvellous specialists of these 'material tasks' of which the Pope speaks; they may also exercise social or technical professions linked to missionary work or to human liberation; they can enter the world of work with all its social hazards and incertitude about the future, or occasional unemployment, but also trade-union involvement and human advancement, in order to share in the workers' lot, be the Christian leaven and work for justice and peace; they are often called to exercise a specific pastoral activity, as many already do; finally they are destined to be particularly valuable in what have come to be called frontier-situations, places where the oppressed, refugees, the marginalized of every description need their love and disinterested service, first on the local level and then in national or international organizations, wherever they are faced with the challenge of misery and can bring about the 'civilization of love'. Within the Spiritan family they take part according to their competence in the common tasks of administration or leadership in positions where they can best serve. This is the public domain of communitarian responsibility.

And there are the young Spiritans in formation, already consecrated, in all latitudes where God's blessing has called them to the Congregation.

Fr Libermann assures us prophetically that we have nothing to fear, that 'holiness' will be gratuitously given to us.

**We must not be afraid; in sending us out God provides for all our needs; we count on him, then, for our sanctification. He prayed for the apostles in a special manner, so that divine grace would be operative in them as long as they were faithful... The apostles had no worries on this point. Holiness would be given to them freely and abundantly provided they remained faithful, so that they could impart it to others (ND XIII 709).**

The Rule of 1849 preserves the act of consecration to be recited before leaving for the missions, Consecration of our Apostolate to our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a statement of dedication to the apostolic life. To get to know the Spiritan's 'profession', what he assumes responsibility for before the Church, why he appeals to the help of God's grace throughout his life, this act of consecration has to be read carefully (ND X 503). It constitutes a kind of pre-written biography: aposto-

late, common life in poverty and obedience, love given wholeheartedly to God, trials to be met and weaknesses to be admitted. The act is more than a personal dedication, it is a covenant for, in the terms chosen by Fr Libermann, there is an appeal to God's care for the one who consecrates himself. The one who has given himself God will clothe with his own faithfulness! And he will provide the support of Mary his Mother. To him who promises never to say 'enough' (Provisional Rule, ND II 237) God promises a fruitful apostolate. The apostle literally empties himself in order to be clothed in Christ's sentiments, with his 'apostolic virtues'. The appeal for God's blessing on setting out, 'the journey, the arrival, the work, the well-loved confreres' and the appeal for Mary's blessing are very moving when we know how many of these young apostles died in the bloom of life. 'Whether in life or in death, we belong to Jesus and Mary', they would say in their last moments (ND VI 310). This act of consecration is the blazon of an extraordinary epic.

#### D – CONSECRATION AS PRIESTS

¶All members of the Holy Ghost Congregation know they are fully Spiritan by reason of their Spiritan consecration. But many of them have also received consecration as priests, which is of an entirely different order. By its origins, in both Fr Poullart des Places's Society and Fr Libermann's, and by its juridical status, our Congregation is clerical. The new Code of canon law ratifies the fact. But, once the unity of our call and the diversity of our gifts is recognized, the consecration of a great number of us as priests as well becomes an immense richness meant both for those who receive it and for the ministry that is undertaken by the Congregation. Our ministry is not only to bring the good news to the poor, with its accompanying signs, but also to assemble and lead the Christian community and make it grow in the way of God through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. 'Priests are consecrated to God in a new way by their ordination, and are made the living instruments of Christ, the eternal priest, and so are enabled to accomplish throughout all time that wonderful work of his which with supernatural efficacy restored the whole human race'. (Vatican II, *Ministry of Priests*, 12).

Priestly ordination is held to be a sacrament that gives the minister a special new gift, a gift of love, a grace, in view of a particular service to accomplish in the Church, and this spiritual gift inheres per-

mainently in him who receives it. In substance, these are Fr Lécuyer's words in his last book, *Le sacrement de l'ordination*, Beauchesne, 1983. 'The presence of ordained ministers in the Christian community is a permanent sign of the continuity of God's gift to his Church. The initiative is God's, he is the never-ending source of all authority, of all pastoral fruitfulness in the midst of his people. . . The priestly character is a new consecration, given to prepare an instrument in view of the sanctification of people; it entails a call to holiness' (p. 269).

It is well-known that a large part of Fr Libermann's apostolic activity was the encouragement and spiritual guidance of priests. More than three quarters of the letters of his voluminous correspondence were addressed to seminarians or priests, some of whom were seminary directors, others were in the ministry. He says in the Provisional Rule:

**We will look on the sanctification of priests as one of the most important points of our ministry. On it depends the salvation of a vast number of souls (ND II 250).**

A dozen articles of the Rule have reference to this ministry with priests. In Paris he set up the Society of St John for the sanctification of priests, whose meetings were attended by many prominent ecclesiastics.

**The man chosen by God and called to the priesthood of Jesus Christ is joined to him as Son of Man in virtue of being chosen, and clothed with his power as Son of God in virtue of being consecrated. Associated thus with Jesus, God and Man, he becomes a mediator with him between God and people (ES 424).**

He continues on this note for several admirable pages about the priestly spirit.

**The germ of the priestly life of Jesus, which makes us one with him in as much as he is sovereign priest and enables us to live his life, is given to us by the sacrament of Orders. It gives us an immense, efficacious love for souls, a love which turns preferably towards the poor, the weak, the unfortunate. . .**

**To this love is added a desire without measure or limit for the salvation and sanctification of souls, and this desire turns preferably towards those whose needs and whose remoteness from salvation are greatest. . .**



**It pertains to the essence of this consecration to God for the salvation of souls that the priest immolates and sacrifices himself, that he lives no longer for himself and his own interests. . .**

**As long as he remains stamped with the priestly character, he belongs wholly to God and souls. Now this character never leaves him; thus his whole life is to be for God and souls, his whole life is to be priestly (ES 428).**

Elsewhere he is at pains to stress the priest's activity *in persona Christi* or the image of the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his sheep. These aspects demand holiness of the priest.

**All those who are responsible for leading the sheep, and who only act in union with the great Shepherd, in his name and in his power, become as one and the same person with him; their whole pastoral activity is his, since it is all done in him, the sovereign Shepherd, who guides, nourishes and rules souls (CSJ 235).**

In another place he speaks of the spirit of victim of the priesthood.

**The general spirit of a priest, whose soul is filled with the grace of priesthood, raises him above himself and all creatures. It makes him obsessed with one thought, the salvation of souls for the glory of God; it makes him forget what concerns himself and indifferent to his own needs and interests; it gives him a courage, a patience and a perseverance that nothing can daunt, weaken, disconcert or stop; it puts a serenity and peace into his soul, an imperturbable moderation in the midst of difficulties, contradictions, humiliations, sicknesses, privations and sufferings of all kinds (ES 427).**

Throughout the years of formation of future priests the priesthood needs to be kept in the forefront, since configuration to Christ the Priest is a long process; and since a priestly vocation is often present in the hearts of young adolescents it is fitting not to neglect this fragile seed but, on the contrary, to protect and nourish it. It is also fitting that the documents of the Congregation and our spiritual apostolate in general would refer to the sanctifying power of the priest's life and priestly ministry for those among us who have received the gift, with all its joys and all its demands.

## II - A MISSION OF TOTAL SALVATION TO ABANDONED SOULS

### A - THE SPIRITAN MISSION IN OUR HISTORY

The Spiritan is consecrated to be sent to the most abandoned. This call re-echoes throughout our history in the hearts of all those who follow the footsteps of Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann. Received willingly as a gift of the Holy Spirit, it has stirred up extraordinary zeal, and continues to do so, in young and old, for all those people in the Church or in society who materially, psychologically, morally or spiritually, are the furthest off, the most marginalized, the most deprived, or simply the neediest. Fr Bouic's Rule of 1734, inspired by the spirit and words of the first founder, is explicit:

**To train poor priests in love of obedience and poverty, and firmly attached to Church discipline, so that they may be, in the hands of their bishops, ready for everything: to serve in hospitals, to bring the gospel to the poor and even to infidels, disposed not only to accept but even to love with all their hearts — and to prefer to all others — the humblest and most painful positions for which the Church finds it hard to get workers.**

The inspiration behind this fine text is indeed Father des Places, who, in the words of his biographer, Fr Thomas, 'had from that time on a particular attraction to the most hidden and abandoned works'.

The tradition became solidly implanted, for we find the priests of Holy Ghost Seminary, and their disciples, the Spiritans, both in the missions of St Grignon de Montfort and in the ministry of the confessions of children (then little esteemed) and of their religious teachers, as another friend of Claude Poullart had asked, John Baptist de la Salle; we find them both in hospitals and in seminaries for poor students, both among the Micmacs of Acadia — a tribe hounded by the occupying forces — and among the 'aboriginals' of Guiana. Had the founder not given the example by looking after the little chimney-sweeps, which Francis Libermann would also do in due course, 'persuaded as he was that their souls were no less dear to Jesus than those of the gentry, and that there was as much hope of good results'

(Thomas)? He had dreamt of consecrating himself to the far-off missions, then he thought it would be preferable to prepare many apostolic workers, competent and virtuous, to come to the aid of abandoned souls.

Fr Libermann's ideas on this subject are well known. In his memorandum to Propaganda Fide, which is his great plan for the apostolate, he proclaimed 'his ardent and continual desire to come to the help of black people, who are so unfortunate'. He sent his first missionaries to Africa, as well as to Bourbon, Mauritius, Haiti and Guiana. Then his interest turned toward 'the three million helpless Blacks' in Brazil; he studied the situation of the Blacks in the United States; he wanted to reach out to Madagascar and the Kaffirs of South Africa. But his solicitude extended to all poor classes, 'according as divine providence will arrange events' (ND IX 185), or 'according to the resources that divine providence will furnish me with in men and money' (ND IX 275). The Provisional Rule emphasized that

**the missions the Congregation will be interested in are those among the poorest and most despised peoples whose needs are greatest, who are the most neglected in the Church of God and among whom we hope to produce much fruit (ND II 241).**

'Ragpickers of the Church' was his definition of the Spiritan; 'we only take what others do not want, we deserve no better' (ND VII 292).

After the Guinea catastrophe he wrote these prophetic words to the community of Bourbon:

**You see how enormous the difficulties are in that country. Does that mean we must become discouraged and abandon so many millions of unfortunates? I am convinced that divine providence is giving us responsibility for these difficult and dangerous missions. We have to remember we are the latest arrivals in the Church of God; we are in the last ranks of God's servants... God is giving us what others do not want. If we do not accept this we have no business in his Church (ND VI 311, 313)**

We come upon the clearest expression of his thought in a letter of May 1851 to Dom Salier, showing his breadth of vision and greatness of heart.



**To preach the good news to the poor, that is our general goal. Nevertheless, the missions are the principal object we aim at, and in the missions we have chosen the most wretched and abandoned souls. Providence gave us our work for the Blacks, whether in Africa or in the colonies; incontestably, these are the most wretched and abandoned populations down to our day. We would also desire to work in France for the salvation of souls, but still having the poor as principal goal, without abandoning, all the same, those who are not (ND XIII 170).**

This is the general line the Congregation has tried to follow throughout its history, notwithstanding the periodic questioning and tensions foretold by Fr Libermann to Fr Le Vavas seur.

**It is true that at the start God drew us to work for the Blacks, and yet we felt the need to spread ourselves more, so that the Rule speaks of abandoned and poor souls in general... Pray about this, examine it and go into it in depth before God... I have no fear of great problems in my lifetime... my concern is for after I die (ND IX 288-294).**

Fr Schwindenhammer, Fr. Libermann's immediate successor, made new foundations in Europe. In 1864 he defended his action. 'They are all painful and laborious works... They are all truly within the end and aim of the Institute, no less in conformity with the letter and spirit of its Rules than with our revered Father's intentions' (Circular no. 34, 1864). The General Chapter of 1896 expresses our specific mission in these terms: 'a common field of apostolate lies before all of us: the Black race; and, among other peoples, deprived souls, the lowly, the disinherited, those most in danger of being lost... We must never lose sight of our goal: the apostolate of abandoned souls' (Circular of Mgr Le Roy, December 1896). An attentive reading of the signs of the times was to widen the field of activity eventually, but the initial plan has remained what the 1906 Chapter expressed: 'It is the mission to the most neglected souls that gives the Congregation its character of unity and is the goal towards which all our efforts tend'. The work of Auteuil would enter into that category, as Mgr Le Roy, the superior general, indicated by proposing his own assistant general as its director, Fr Daniel Brottier.

Since then, very many 'abandoned souls' have been the object of Spiritans' zeal: migrants, refugees, prisoners, lepers, pygmies, op-

pressed persons, peoples who are the object of injustice by great nations, exiles, descendants of former slaves, the unemployed youth of big cities. Some Spiritans are found at many of the outposts of material or moral misery. Our Constitutions have undergone seven revisions in a hundred years, but the Spiritans have never modified the infinite horizons of their service of the most abandoned. A sign of this is that they have always retained the Latin Rule and always feared to depart from the primitive text in adapting to present times. Although they were the first missionaries of Africa, the Spiritans have never claimed that title. Their project is even wider, always ready 'to hasten to the help of that part of the Church most abandoned and unappreciated' (Libermann, ND II 182). The superlative in that phrase offers limitless scope to our zeal: to take our rightful last place, for the good of the neediest! 'The greatest evil that could take hold of an Institute', wrote Mgr Le Hunsec, superior general, in 1950, 'is to be unfaithful to its providential destiny, such as it was fixed by those who received the commission'. It is good to give thanks to the Lord for that long fidelity to the first call, which is as vibrant as ever!

We quite deliberately speak of a 'mission of total or global salvation' for, as well as bringing the good news 'to the nearest of the furthest' (Yves Raguin), we aim at saving the whole person. There enters into this total salvation, over and above the positive approach to the civilization of the peoples we are sent to, care for their human advancement, for their place in society and the defence of their interests.

**They will let slip no occasion of doing not only spiritual good but also material... They will bring all the comfort and ease they can to their pains... They will be the advocates, support and defenders of the weak and helpless against all their oppressors. These are the circumstances in which our Lord's charity and power (will appear in them) (ND II 255-6).**

Over and above justice, it is love that will knit human relationships, a '*love poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who is given to us*' (Rom 5:5). Recent Chapters have fixed the priorities of the apostolate and alerted the Congregation to the theme of justice and peace. More recently a mission of first evangelization was opened in Asia (Pakistan), international teams of missionary activity have been set up, African confreres have gone on the missions to other African countries, volunteers have gone to live among refugees, and others

have offered themselves for more dangerous situations. (Cf. I/D 7, 11, 12, 13, and the priority-commitments of the Generalate Team, February 1976). Missionary work is truly boundless. So many peoples have not yet received and accepted the gospel; many are alienated by their own conquests, in search of lost values, while others groan under the weight of unjust oppression. 'Your eyes must open wide to the needs of people, their problems, their searching; you must give witness among them by prayer and activity to the power of the good news of love, justice and peace' (*Evangelica Testificatio* 52). This is the challenge of the year 2,000 AD!

### B - WHO ARE THE MOST ABANDONED TODAY?

The very expression, 'the most abandoned', arouses suspicions nowadays. What does it mean exactly? Abandoned by whom, in what, why, how? Who has the right to categorize 'the most abandoned'? Where do we stand ourselves? And, supposing 'the most abandoned' to exist objectively, who is qualified to recognize them as such and make decisions in their favour? Is it the local Church, the Congregation, or the generous individual Spiritan? Supposing finally that we have identified the most abandoned, and that the competent authority has committed itself to act on their behalf, the question arises: what will be our specific task for them — help, salvation, liberation? Emptied of ideology, what do these words mean? What will distinguish us from other groups or organizations aiming to 'help, save, liberate'?

In the spirit of our founders, the expression, 'the most abandoned', assuredly had a strong biblical flavour that will help us to get beyond a simple sociological analysis. Isaiah 61 is the passage most commonly and almost exclusively used in this context. Jesus quoted it in the synagogue at Nazareth. *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor'*. But the whole chapter must be read to see who the poor are, what constitutes their poverty, and how the Servant of Yahweh, himself poor, will deliver them. Other passages of Isaiah must be consulted too, like 11:6-9, 40:11, 42:1, 49:9-10. The Gospel of Matthew is also instructive, for example 9:35-38: *Jesus continued his tour of all the towns and villages. He taught in their synagogues, he proclaimed the good news of God's reign, and he cured every sickness and disease. At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity. They were lying*



*prostrate from exhaustion, like sheep without a shepherd. He said to his disciples: 'The harvest is good but labourers are scarce. Beg the harvest master to send out labourers to gather his harvest'.*

This text clarifies the fundamental plight of the 'most abandoned'. Along the lines suggested by the shepherd-image, Ezekiel 34 and John 10 must be re-read. They raise the question, Who is responsible for abandoning the sheep? All those who feed themselves instead of feeding the sheep, those meant by the psalm, '*when they eat their bread, it is my people they eat*'. Behind the condition of the most abandoned there is always a sinful situation, a negligence, an injustice, a venal desertion, whether it comes from the civil or religious society, in short, 'the wounded heart of people that has to be healed' (Synod of Bishops 1983). Thus, to come to the help of the most abandoned, nothing less is needed than the very dispositions of the Good Shepherd, ready to give his life. In his *Commentary on St John's Gospel* Fr Libermann has an excellent reflection on the parable of the Good Shepherd along those lines. It may be noted astutely that Jesus himself pin-pointed concretely who the most abandoned were that he was to look after: he said to the Canaanite woman, '*My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*' (Mt 15: 24). Fr Libermann was marked by the circumstances of his call. Tisserant and Le Vavas seur had spoken to him about the material and spiritual plight of the freed slaves of Haïti and the island of Bourbon. The thought haunted him but he took no step until the day of his 'burning bush', October 28, 1839, when he clearly heard the Lord's voice. '*I have seen, I have seen my people's misery. . . . Go, I am sending you. . . . Here I am, send me*'.

Libermann would always see that misery with the eyes of God. He indulged in no condescending pity, no purely sociological analysis, although he took pains to size up the situation of abandonment of the Blacks and apply the proper remedy to the underlying causes. He saw spiritual abandonment as the cause of material abandonment. The remedy would be to offer the faith at the same time as the benefits of 'civilization'. The abandonment showed itself in this that the Blacks were marginalized, treated as underdogs, whereas Jesus had poured out his blood for them — this was the foundation of human rights and dignity for both Libermann and Poullart des Places; they were the butt of humiliating prejudices, mean in the eyes of others and demeaning of themselves through despair. They were 'left to themselves', whereas they should belong to Christ, the Good Shepherd. Yes, they were like sheep without a shepherd, like abandoned children, lacking the warmth and trust of paternal love. Some people take offence at Libermann

speaking about 'the poor Blacks'. 'Not me', said an African confrere. 'When you see in what context he was speaking, from what point of view he looked, and especially how much he defended the dignity of all Black peoples relentlessly, he can only be classed amongst the greatest benefactors of the Black race, well before people like Schoelcher'.

Libermann's goal was to make these people religiously and even economically independent, for they must be taught to fend for themselves with a local clergy, schools, agriculture, arts and crafts — the basis of a civilization independent of the missionaries' presence. In the long run, the most abandoned are the sheep dispersed through the fault of religious and political shepherds. To look after the most abandoned is to work at bringing back to the security, freedom and warmth of the sheepfold, with a true shepherd, the sheep who are sick of being left to themselves with all the spiritual and material consequences of that.

Everything Fr Libermann did and said was rooted in his personal experience; his experience of the 'most abandoned' was first of all existential. He knew what it meant to live in a ghetto, to be despised as a Jew, to be cursed by his father when he became a Christian, to feel bodily the humiliation of a terrible sickness. Familiar with the radical poverty of humans before God and with the extraordinary grace of the Covenant, he could understand from inside 'the misery of human beings without God'. The situation of the Africans of his time found a living echo in his ultra-sensitive soul.

A precondition for looking after the abandoned is first of all an ability to see the world's misery with the eyes of God and be moved by it. *'I have seen my people's misery. . . seeing the crowds, Jesus was moved to pity for them. . .'* Then there is concern about the number and quality of the missionaries. 'The harvest is good but labourers are scarce'. The missionaries will be poor, 'in solidarity with the poor' (*Religious and Human Development*, Introduction); they will be the servants of the most abandoned, not judging themselves to be better than the local priests; they will be available, towards God (for he gives us our 'most abandoned' as a sign of his predilection: 'I entrust to you those most dear to me'), and towards the local Church that we serve; finally they will try hard to reveal people to themselves, in revealing to them 'that they are Jesus' (a fine formula of Baba Simon, about the Kirdis of North Cameroun) and must behave accordingly. This is the marvellous starting-point of every work of development, culminating normally in communion, in the gathering of the dispersed

sheep. It is an activity of unique inspiration, pursued in multiform commitments.

### C – MULTIFORM MISSION

One confrere told us about where he exercises his ministry, a little town or rural area, where the disintegration of the traditional African society and the threat to its values means changing the social structure from within by encouraging an authentic Christian community.

Another let it be known that for him, an African, the youth of the big cities seemed 'the most abandoned souls'.

For another confrere, teaching in a university, 'the most abandoned souls' were the contemporary wise men and technicians enclosed in their materialist universe.

For another, in the place of his ministry in Europe, it was the elderly, foreign students, oppressed persons. 'The Spiritan reflex', he said, 'is to turn towards the most abandoned wherever one is'.

Another, who is a teacher and educator, considers himself as sent there where obedience has placed him, at the direct or indirect service of the common mission.

This confrere has spent his life for the lepers of his area, in Africa, for their physical and moral rehabilitation.

Another lives in solidarity with the poor of a little forest tribe.

Still another engages in pre-evangelization with an animist people who are open to the Christian faith.

Another is at the service of the formation of priests, 'in the footsteps of Poullart des Places and Libermann'.

This confrere in a Moslem country is constrained to be a living witness of the gospel by creating bonds of friendship.

Another in a mission-parish is building a Christian community 'evangelized and evangelizing'.

Someone spoke of women as particularly abandoned in many countries, where they are an object of exploitation or social discrimination.

One Province has been committed for twenty-five years to the service of a huge complex for mentally ill. 'We take what others do not want, we deserve no better' (ND VII 292). 'That is our ideal'.

An older confrere protested strongly when he was introduced as 'a former missionary' (sic!), considering himself still a missionary even in retirement.



We heard many witnesses, from that of our Haitian confreres in Brooklyn to that of Servol in Trinidad, that of the basic communities in Brazil, our brothers in Angola, Paraguay and Ethiopia. There is no end of works where the Congregation has deployed Spiritans to 'the most neglected, the neediest', with the dangers and persecutions that often accompany them, in fidelity to their call. A long prayer of thanksgiving was called for by the memory of such courage and love.

'In the diversity of our works and commitments, old and new, what will be the principal element of unity, the common characteristic of all our Spiritan works? It is that all will feel involved, united, making part of the *ensemble* of missionary commitments of the Congregation and its work for the poorest. That is the heart of our Spiritan vocation, even if the ways of realizing it are multiform' (Extract from a letter of Fr Timmermans, superior general, to the confreres of a Province, January 1978).



## Chapter II

# VOWS AND COMMUNITY

## I - THE VOWS

### A - A GIFT THE CHURCH AUTHENTICATES

The Spiritan is called to be an apostle of Christ to the most abandoned, allowing Christ to continue his apostolic ministry through him. His call is to live united to him *'who went about doing good'* (Acts 10 : 38) and *'gave his life as a ransom for the many'* (Mt 20 : 28). But, like the apostles, he feels his weakness, like them he enters into the mystery of his vocation only little by little. He is a sinner, chosen as such, but a forgiven sinner. *'Lord, you know everything. You know well that I love you'* (Jn 21 : 17). Like the spiritual journey of the Twelve, his is made of highs and lows, of enthusiasm and discouragement, of generosity and laxity. His weakness comes to lean more and more on Christ's power. He makes the first beatitude his own — that of the spiritually poor person who awaits everything from God, who stakes everything on him in complete trust, and experiences an immense desire for him. Because drawn on by God — he first loved us (cf. I Jn 4 : 10) — he is willing to offer his life in the same gesture of love as Christ, who, out of love for his Father, gave his life for all *'so that they might have life and have it to the full'* (Jn 10 : 10). The mystery of his vocation is a mystery of love, a covenant of love with God at the service of the most deprived, which will manifest itself in his words and deeds and all his relationships, in his smile and in the tenderness of his heart. This gift of himself is received and accepted by Christ through the Church's mediation. The Church becomes the mediatrix of this consecration when profession is made of the evangelical counsels before her in a total offering of the person, since this state of life belongs to her own life and holiness. In doing this, the apostle gives *'outstanding and striking testimony that the world cannot be*



transfigured and offered to God without the spirit of the beatitudes' (*Lumen Gentium* 31). And the Church integrates it into the mission the Risen Lord has entrusted to it.

The vows are the privileged expression of this fuller gift. Through them the Spiritan commits himself to follow to the end, that is to say, at the price of all necessary sacrifices, Jesus the Apostle in his spirit of chastity, poverty and obedience. 'As a response to the gift of God, the vows are the triple expression of a single "Yes" to the unique relationship of total consecration' (John Paul II, *Letter to the US Bishops*, April 1983, no. 14).

## B - CHASTITY

The Council gave priority to the vow of chastity, as if to emphasize that the driving force that leads people to hand themselves over to Christ in order to share his mission is none other than love. Christ's love was undivided, universal, absolute; his heart was vowed without reserve to his Father's love and the love of all people. That is how the Spiritan wants to follow him, captivated as he is by the reality of God and anxious to guarantee the unity of his heart and service. 'Celibacy, in which we renounce the joy of founding a home and having children, is not a flight from the duties of family life, rather it is the result of a free deliberate choice made in order to dedicate ourselves more completely to the missionary apostolate' (CDD, 1968, no. 74). Likewise it is, for those who see us living it, a sign that God can fill the human heart, either 'in the young Churches we found' or 'for those who have not the faith'. 'Far from being a refusal to love, it liberates our capacity for self-giving; it helps us to find in each face the face of Christ, to love with tenderness the poor whom we evangelize, and to be all things to all' (CDD 77). These quotations from the 1968 General Chapter characterize the Spiritan option for chastity.

When Jesus speaks of celibacy for the kingdom (Mt 19) he shows the depth of his relationship with his Father. There is no question of a ritual purity, like the Old Testament priest who refrained from sexual acts for some time before serving in the Temple, or the Scribe while studying the Torah. The self-denial Jesus asks for is based on love, it is the expression of a heart seized by God. In I Cor 7 celibacy is envisaged '*for the Lord*', so that a person may be exclusively '*busy with the Lord's affairs*'. Finally one vows chastity in order to love bet-

ter. It is the 'yes' said to the Lord with one's heart and body and power of loving, in preference to a 'yes' said to a man or woman exclusively, a covenant 'yes', a 'yes' that opens unto universal Love, a 'yes' that becomes a faith-event, a 'yes' recognized in faith. It is born of sheer wonder before the Lord, the will that he alone should be everything for us, wanting to love because of him, in him and for him (J. M. R. Tillard, O.P.). It is like a communion in Jesus' 'yes' to the Father, making him simultaneously the friend of all, especially of the unfortunate and those furthest off. It is a 'yes' that makes the human heart like Christ's, charged with the tenderness that fills the gospel, a heart sensitive to weakness, compassionate, welcoming sinners, *'for he himself is beset by weakness'* (Heb 5 : 2). It is impossible to do good to people without loving them, and we will never love enough. *'So shall your descendants be'*, the Lord said to Abraham (Gen 15 : 5). Descendants in the faith are also real. Unto how many generations will not the spiritual fruitfulness continue of those who *'are an aroma of Christ for God's sake'* (II Cor 2 : 15)?

We could add that voluntary chastity for the kingdom of God places us on the side of minorities. It shows that a marginalized existence can be lived in hope. But above all it opens the Spiritan's heart, sustained by real friendships and by a brotherly community, to that goodness Lacordaire spoke of: 'goodness is what most resembles God and most disarms people'.

Fr Libermann saw the practice of chastity as depending on each missionary's basic attitude of self-denial. He treats of it at length in the two Rules and the Gloss. He insists on the elementary pre-condition of prudence, which will allow sentiments or passions to be checked in time that could be difficult later to control. 'Fire, once set alight, is hard to extinguish'. He invites us to live in interior peace, to be psychologically balanced. He was quite at his ease with the women he met or corresponded with; his attitude showed real attachment, self-possession and great simplicity in the relationships, far removed from either stiff or ambiguous attitudes, in accordance with 'the pure and chaste love that the heart of Mary was filled with for her divine Son' (ND II 265).

The apostolic community sustains the consecrated chastity of each member, and the community, in turn, when it is lived in genuine fraternal communion within and without — which presupposes thorough insertion among the people being evangelized —, gives prophetic witness to evangelization: generous, disinterested love gives the lie to the selfish, self-interested love that often damages human relationships.

## C - POVERTY

The 1849 Rule, no. 498, reads:

**As the Congregation is more essentially apostolic than religious, its spirit and general trend do not bear on vowing a special cult of the three virtues expressed in the vows. The Congregation wishes for complete perfection in their interior practice, and ordinary practice in the exterior.**

The Provisional Rule had said the same thing about poverty:

**The special end of our vocation is not at all the practice of poverty; poverty for us should be a means of practising the apostolic life and virtues.**

It is well-known that our Congregation had the same spirit from its foundation. 'In Poullart des Places's house, poverty was less a necessity than a *mystique*. It was spiritual poverty that made material poverty to be not only accepted but loved and sought after' (Joseph Michel, *Claude Poullart des Places*). Holy Ghost Seminary and its past students wrote a golden legend of poverty. It began with Claude Poullart. In front of his former fellow-students, young nobles of whom he was, like Francis of Assisi, the most 'glorious' (he had been chosen to play the 'Glory' in a student ballet), he came dressed in a poor soutane and went to the kitchen to ask for the left-overs and carry them in his own hands across the college courtyard to his 'poor scholars' (who numbered seventy before he died). He was their servant, cleaning their shoes, doing their messages. At his death at the age of thirty, he was buried like the poor and laid in a common grave. Pierre Caris, his faithful confidant, deserved to be known as 'the poor priest' in Paris, and wished for his own remains the same common grave reserved for the poor: 'I wish my burial to be according to the custom of the house' (*ibid.*, p. 313). Jacques Hédan, director of the seminary, realizing at the moment of his death that he possessed a coin, gave it to a poor person saying, 'I was born poor, I have lived poor, I want to die poor'. He was interred in the midst of his beloved poor, as he had requested (Letter of Fr Lanoé, 1784). From that example to Bishop Bessieux's in Gabon, which was also legendary, from Blessed Fr Laval to Fr Brottier (who expected a thousand francs a day from St Thérèse



to feed his orphans and was never disappointed), models of poverty have dotted our Spiritan history, but always related to the apostolate, the manifestation of an authentic spirit of spiritual poverty. The *fiorretti* of La Neuville are famous on this subject.

The counsel of poverty is understood in the light of the first beatitude — which is the key to understanding them all. 'Beyond its apostolic witness in the missions of today, and still more of tomorrow, our poverty will become a demand of *interior poverty*' (*Spiritan News*, no. 27, p. 3). Happy the poor! In the Old Testament the poor are those who trust in God and, because of their uprightness and goodness, are rejected by society. 'The poor are those who pay the price of their moral commitment, those who experience from within the powerlessness of the good in the world and whose ultimate hope is justification by Yahweh' (Klaus Demmer, *The Evangelical Counsels*).

Jesus underwent that experience; he took the lot of the weak on himself. '*For your sake he made himself poor though he was rich, so that you might become rich by his poverty*' (II Cor 8 : 9). The Incarnation means God becoming poor. Jesus corroborated his message by the witness of his life. When he calls the poor happy he is referring to himself and all those who will follow him. To follow the poor Christ is to enter into poverty. The apostle who would imitate his 'generosity' (II Cor 8 : 9) is prodigal of time and energy in living like Jesus and witnessing to him. He gives himself completely to the service of others with a preferential love for those lacking everything. He is satisfied with the bare necessities for himself and his ministry, concentrating on the 'essential'. He depends totally on God in life and in death. Then he becomes a sign of the essential, a provocation, a fascination that gives meaning to life. The detachment Jesus asks of the Spiritan is a commitment in favour of the poor. 'Christian poverty, the expression of love, is in solidarity with the poor and struggles against misery' (Gustave Gutiérrez). To be in solidarity with the poor is to share their experience of suffering and loneliness, and especially their insecurity. It is to undertake practical means not only 'to assuage misery but to attack its causes' (Abbé Pierre). Underdevelopment and insolvency are evils, as are unjust profit and the accumulation of goods at all levels. The document on Justice and Peace of our last Chapter affirms that to vow poverty is to commit oneself to serve the unfortunate, personally and collectively; but those who are vowed to poverty know well that material poverty is close to the first beatitude and that '*not on bread alone is man to live*'. Our option for the poor is an option for Jesus poor, present in them. The vow of poverty means

sharing the goods of the apostolic community. This itself is a denunciation of the profit-motive in the use of goods. Thus it witnesses eloquently to God's plan, the building of a society based on justice and love.

Fr Libermann passes the remark that those in the midst of the poor are naturally joyful. The sacrifices they make are largely compensated for by a greater simplicity in relating to God and to our less well off fellowmen. Close to the poor and prudently distancing themselves from the rich, satisfied with simple needs, Spiritans 'will behave with the freedom, dignity and propriety that mark the apostolic person representing Jesus Christ on earth' (*Synopsis of the two Rules*, 503).

Fr Liagre Milien, of holy memory, novice-master of many years and spiritual writer, born seven years after Fr Libermann's death, used to say that the essential virtue of the Congregation was humility. 'Our Fathers were humble; they wanted to have a humble Society. We should love our humility as a family trait. The spirit of our religious family, the characteristic of the Congregation, of its members and its works, is humility. It is our glory to consecrate ourselves to the little ones, to the forlorn, to humble and poor souls and works. *'Evangelizare pauperibus misit me'*. That was the Son of God's lot. It is ours'. The spirit of our apostolic poverty could not be better put.

## D - OBEDIENCE

'By choosing to enter a missionary Society, the Spiritan undertakes to follow Christ and to enter into the mystery of his redemptive obedience' (CDD 112). *'He learned obedience from what he suffered'* (Heb 5:8). This indicates the constant sacrifice demanded of the Spiritan, to accomplish fully the mission the Father entrusts to him; it also enables the Father to work freely in him through the Holy Spirit. Knowing what is at stake, he vows a free and responsible obedience. 'United with Christ in obedience to the will of the Father he will continue his mission under the authority of the hierarchy of the Church and collaborate in the mystery of salvation' (*Ad Gentes*, 25).

By choosing obedience the Spiritan is assured of knowing the Father's will, of following it with certainty, and of finding a fruitful apostolate in it. 'He who wishes that all people should be saved' has prepared 'for those he loves' the ways of salvation. Obedience enables the apostle to bring this about. Wherever God wants him, there God's eternal loving plan is realized in and through him, whether in a

lonely mission station or in city ministry or in administration. What does it matter? From the Amazon to the Congo, from Zanzibar to Sao Paolo, wherever he is, 'it is good to give thanks always and everywhere' to God who is bringing about his kingdom, and doing so first of all in the apostle's heart. Obedience is a mystery of faith and love. We seek the Father's will in the apostolic community, which must be ever attentive to the signs of that will: the Congregation's orientations, its Rule of life, superiors' decisions, events and calls. Over and above the obligations we assume, we enter with Jesus into the Father's will by noting pastoral needs and social conditions and praying for the sufferings we find there, by trying to understand people's attitudes and the statements of authority, by engaging in local pastoral projects, united in faith with our co-workers in the apostolate, our bishop and superiors. Obedience has its value, greatness and merit at that level and in that light of faith. At times it will demand painful changes in one's own ideas and options. *'I have come, O Father, to do your will'*. It will be a source of resurrection and peace.

Obedience has always been prominent in the Spiritan tradition. Our history is dotted with examples of how heroically it has been lived, especially in first appointments. The chapters on obedience in the Provisional Rule of 1840 and the Rule of 1849 have almost identical texts, with all of Fr Libermann's insistence on the 'spirit' of obedience. He wrote memorable lines about superiors. 'About being superior, a general rule that covers everything is that one does not come to be served but to serve' (ND IV 293). The calls to missionary work will be discussed in community, there the Father's will will be found in fraternal dialogue. Communities in this way will implicitly denounce all forms of totalitarianism and individualism, which are at the heart of human conflicts, by showing that each one's freedom must respect and promote the common good, and that authority is a service.

## E - CONCLUSION

The Spiritan sets out on the road of the evangelical counsels with his eyes fixed on Jesus the Apostle, *'who inspires and perfects our faith; for the sake of the joy which lay before him he endured the cross, heedless of its shame; he has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God'* (Heb 12:2). Jesus kept nothing back, he gave all he had and all he was to those to whom the Father had sent him; he loved them unto



the end (Jn 13 : 11); he enriched them from his poverty (II Cor 8 : 9); his obedience saved those whom primal disobedience had lost (Rom 5 : 8-19). That is why the Father glorified him (Phil 2 : 9). This is the love the apostle appropriates through thick and thin, fighting the good fight, through his failures and re-starts, with the power the Risen Lord gives him. *'In him who is the source of my strength I have strength for everything'* (Phil 4 : 13).

## II - COMMUNITY

The Spiritan is primarily an apostle, reproducing in his life the journeying methods of Jesus and his apostles for the salvation of souls, particularly the most abandoned. We must look at our apostolic community life in that perspective.

**'The great means is to have our eyes fixed on our Lord in his ministry and on his apostles; they are our models' (Gloss p. 145).**

Community life and missionary work have their source and term in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. The communion of the divine Persons in love is at the origin of every Christian community as preamble and model. To communicate this divine life is the object of missionary work.

### A - THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS' APOSTLES

Jesus gathered the first apostolic community around himself. In the gospel we see him calling some of them by the lakeside where they were fishers, another he calls under the fig-tree he happened to be passing, another at his tax-collector's desk. Some refuse the call, others who wish to follow him are not allowed to. They are all called personally, objects of a free choice; one by one they are solemnly appointed by Jesus after a night in the prayer of God. Yet their faithfulness is not guaranteed for all that, they will have difficult moments, they will have to make the definitive choice before the crucified Messiah; but their common call unites them. So does the generosity of their response, their radical leaving of all things to follow him, even their own understanding of the Messianic kingdom. And so does their life-experience with Jesus, who trains them, throughout three years of sharing, for a mission that will prolong his own. Dispersed by the scandal of the Passion, they would come together again — without the traitor — first in fear and then in the joy of the Resurrection. In the upper room the community would receive the Spirit of Pentecost. *'That they may be one as we are one. . . so that your love for me may live in them, and I may live in them'* (Jn 17 : 22-26). Their unity has a divine source, the Spirit of Jesus living in each one brings the community to

be. Jesus prayed to his Father for their unity, since community is a gift of God. *'Every worthwhile gift, every genuine benefit comes from above, descending from the Father'* (Jm 1 : 17). The community of the apostles, which would beget the ecclesial community, was meant to continue Jesus' presence and mission, or rather Jesus living in them does this.

In the Acts of the Apostles St Luke does nothing to hide the differences, contrasts and oppositions that marked the first apostolic community. Even the most fervent of the apostles, Peter and Paul, were disagreed on pastoral methods. But it was a community grafted onto Christ and enthusiastic about him — *'Caritas Christi urget nos'* (II Cor 1 : 14) — to the point of living and dying for him. He was the heart of the community, through his Spirit leading and guiding it.

This same Spirit of Jesus initiates, gathers and makes fruitful the Spiritan community in all its diversity of persons. My confreres are those he gives me to love with a certain responsibility, with whom I bear witness. *'Grow strong in your holy faith'* (Jude 20). What unites us, like the apostles, is our common call, our common response, our life-experience and mission with Jesus. The more his Spirit becomes the active leader of each one, the more the *cor unum et anima una* that he promotes shines forth. The more we allow him, as a group, to lead us, as a group, in the service of the missionary work that the Church entrusts to us, the more we will multiply the power of his sovereign activity. As with individuals, so the work the community is sent to do is not locally circumscribed but transcends space and time. Christ the Lord, who continues his presence and mission by its means through the length and breadth of his mystical Body, is at the source of its life and fruitfulness.

#### B – FATHER LIBERMANN AND APOSTOLIC COMMUNITY

Fr Libermann took up this body-image on introducing 'the spiritual state of the Congregation'.

**A spiritual body may be compared with a physical body, the members of a spiritual body with the members of a physical body. As the members of a physical body are united among themselves, the members of a spiritual body must be bound among themselves... I have said before and I repeat it, that as long as there is union among the members of our Congregation**

**we will do much good, but if this union comes to break up we will be in trouble (Gloss, p. 59).**

He was speaking here, as he often does, of both the particular community and the wider community which is the Congregation. He sees the community coming to be and developing only from the point of view of faith.

**Community life is a grouping of souls and not only of bodies. It is a grouping of souls tending to the same goal. In a religious community this goal is supernatural; hence community life ought to be altogether supernatural with God as its beginning and end (*idem*).**

He sees the heart of community life in the fruits of the Spirit lived by each one. 'When things are seen in God', he said, 'agreement is easily reached' (ND II 85). He keeps coming back to the essential reality of faith.

**We all have the same virtue of charity poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and our Lord's same command about charity: love one another as I have loved you. We have come together to live together and work in harmony; he wants us specially united among ourselves.**

And he goes on to explain:

**The union that should reign among us is to be a union of mind and heart. A union of mind: this contains three elements and, as it were, three degrees. Not to wish to subject others to our ideas, especially not to become annoyed when they do not think as we do... To have a certain disposition and facility for coming round to the opinion of others... To act as if one was of the other's opinion, when one foresees no problems from that... A union of heart: this consists in the mutual and intimate affection we should have for one another... What we do to our brothers we consider as done to our Lord (Gloss, pp. 124-125).**

The first thing to aim at is the close union of all in view of the sanctification of all and apostolic fruitfulness. The Rule is explicit:

**For perfecting the apostolic life which is its goal, for stabilizing and extending the works which are its object, and for sanctify-**



**ing its members, the Congregation has taken common life as a fundamental rule. All the members will always live in community (ND X 454).**

He was unaware, naturally, of our contemporary human sciences that treat of group-dynamics but, keen observer of human nature that he was, he gave varied practical advice, full of wisdom, humour and psychological sharpness, about the attributes of true charity. They occur in chapter three of the 1849 Rule and in pages 124-143 of the Gloss. Charity will be true, sincere, cordial, affective, simple, frank, straight, modest, serious, respectful, pious and holy. 'By loving one's confreres in God and for God, one will try to make God reign in them' (ND X 540).

**They ought to have a preference for their confreres to all other people, loving them as other selves with the love of the holy heart of their Mother, with the fulness of God's Spirit that filled it (ND X 539).**

In a long letter to 'the community of Dakar and Gabon' (sic), Fr Libermann elaborates on the qualities that Spiritan apostles should have, 'community men and apostolic men' at the same time.

**Learn to be true community men, genuinely apostolic men; learn how to be wise with the wisdom of God in order to contribute, each in his measure, in bringing the great work God gives you to a successful issue.**

Really to know what he thought on community life, these pages are essential reading (ND IX 326). They stress what is characteristic of the Spiritan community — to be completely oriented towards the apostolate and to live an appropriate spirituality, that of the first community of Jesus' apostles. Once again the unity of our call is emphasized, the vital and life-giving unity of our Spiritan vocation. He wrote to Fr Tisserand:

**Two things you have to take care of: your own sanctification and that of the souls you deal with for their salvation. Each of these depends on the other. It is impossible to sanctify yourself without working might and main for the salvation of the souls entrusted to you; and it is scarcely possible for you to sanctify**

**those souls while neglecting yourself... So one must be done and the other not omitted (ND II 472).**

The virtues that govern the interaction of the apostles among themselves will also govern their interactions in their Christian communities. How can they preach the latter without practising the former?

**Be full of affection, gentleness and openness with superiors in order to make their burden easier to carry. Live together in union and in the most perfect peace of charity. Support one another mutually, put up with your faults, ease the pain for one another, comfort your confreres, do not judge them, love them and be gentle towards them even when they happen to annoy you.**

**When you happen not to be of the same opinion as your confreres, lose your own judgement in the general opinion. Tenaciousness to one's own ideas is one of the greatest evils for people who ought to live together in the peace and charity of Jesus Christ (LS IV 458).**

Some months before he died, he complained in a letter to Fr Col-lin, for the Bourbon community, that the work was ousting community life and that the latter was being sacrificed to the former. He takes a serious view of this, and speaks in a prophetic tone. Obviously he has a presentiment that his charism, one that the Lord was calling his friends to follow, was in danger of wilting if a fair balance was not found in genuine apostolic life.

**They see souls to be saved, work to be done, and community life as a fetter to be shaken off. They have done with community life in order to give vent to their burning desires. Believing they are moved by zeal they give in to natural impetuosity. They console themselves for the loss of recollection and community life by the good that is being done to the souls they try to save, and they never think of the harm to themselves and others... If the Congregation was reduced to this by the imprudent zeal of its members, what use would it be? (ND XIII 294).**

None of us is unaware how relevant these words are today. 'Charity, charity above all' was his last message.

## C – THE SPIRITAN COMMUNITY

The 1980 General Chapter noted the variety of communities we have: big and small communities, regional communities, new-style communities, work-communities grouping isolated confreres. 'We are happy to find renewal and real progress already, even if it is still tentative: communities that are places where each and all learn to live together, allowing themselves to be evangelized and be reconciled to one another. . . communities that have the courage to take risks together. . . communities in full solidarity with the people among whom they find themselves, and involved in their struggles. . . communities sharing their life and apostolic experience' (nos. 89, 90).

In point of fact, an apostolic community does not start from an ideal vision but from an apostolate confided to it and God's plan for it. It accepts itself as God's gift, where each one is a living stone of the building, where each receives as much as he gives, where each invests his affection, his interest and his services. To the question, 'What is the community doing for me?', I must add, 'What am I doing for the community?' 'Brotherliness means openness to one another, reciprocal trust, respect for the other and his personal approach to life, unconditional acceptance of what he is, the sincere desire to help him in seeking God and his personal development, communion of the same essential values' (Tillard, *Religieux aujourd'hui*, p. 191).

Community prayer is an essential part of community life. It is both praise of '*him who has loved us*' (I Jn 4 : 10) and the radiant centre of the apostolate. All the members bring their ministries to bear on it and draw from it the strength and joy to continue. The praise of a whole people goes up to the Lord, and his blessing comes down through the voice and heart of his apostles, united in the Cenacle like the first apostles in prayer, and listening to the Word of God with Mary the Mother of Jesus. Prayer and missionary labours are harmonized by the community life that sends out and welcomes back.

The apostolic community plans its work as a group. Gathered in the Lord's name it reflects on what takes place, it brings its joys and sorrows before God, its successes and failures. It reflects on its own witness. A community for the work, it is also a community for the people who form it, a life-community, a community on the level of both acting and being. It takes the time needed on both counts, so that people can speak out and have conflicts and tensions resolved. The stronger the personalities the livelier the confrontation, but also

the better for both action and interaction. It is a good sign to see communities adopting a regular rhythm of meetings, even weekly, where they listen to each other in faith, understand each other in hope, and make an offering of themselves and their work to the Lord in love. They take new decisions based on a 'consensus' born of long discussion. That much accomplished, each pledges himself to God's will in obedience, offering himself with his companions. At times the community will be divided; the superior intervenes clearly at that point saying, 'seeing the circumstances, this is what we will do'. This safeguards each one's freedom and responsibility, for each one has his apostolic preferences — they are gifts of grace — but in obedience to the common plan. In this sense the superior is responsible for the common responsibility. 'True personality does not consist in affirming oneself over against others but in knowing one's own condition of sonship' (Xavier-Dufour).

The superior has a leadership role in the community (*Mutuae Relationes* 13), which is both spiritual and pastoral, in conformity with the Congregation's grace of unity. Those called to exercise the ministry of authority will remember that the spirit of service towards their brothers is an expression of God's love for them. The superior too must obey, so that God's designs will be carried out in all. 'This service of unifying leadership requires that superiors be aware of pastoral needs and not absorbed by purely administrative tasks, that they see themselves as guides for both the spiritual and apostolic growth of each one and of the entire community, and be accepted in this light' (*Contemplative Dimension of the Religious Life*, 16). In the history of the Congregation, occasional failures have occurred for want of that spirit in superiors.

It can also be useful for the apostolic community to have an informed observer from outside from time to time, who can help it to assess itself and its life.

At the heart of every Christian life is the cross, and at the heart of every apostolic community, as a necessity for renewal. Instead of scrutinizing the human ins and outs of conflicts, it would be opportune to welcome them as preludes to a resurrection. Mutual forgiveness is indicated, the ministry of reconciliation is indispensable (Jean Vanier, *La communauté, lieu de pardon et de la fête*). Sufferings must be looked at calmly: advancing age, sicknesses, bereavements, misunderstandings. A community thus envisaged may appear utopic, for its full realization is eschatological, but it is the Christian risk, the apostles' wager on Jesus' presence in their midst. '*I am among you all days*'.



The welcoming simplicity of our Spiritan communities was often mentioned. That is something to retain. Mutual esteem — *'let all parties think humbly of others as superior to themselves'* (Ph 2:3) — good humour and banter, good interpersonal relationships, collaboration, service, a helping hand — all of these help. Of varied ages, ideas and cultures, all are brothers (with no 'second-class citizens'), harnessed to the same work, filled with the same Spirit. 'We are gathered together to speak the love of God together' (Madeleine Delbrel). 'We are a little family that Jesus and Mary have specially chosen' (Gloss 124). For Libermann, the communion of saints is a way of life. Jesus *'did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at'* (Ph 2:6); nothing gave him 'a head-start' in dealing with us. Fr Varillon wrote: 'If your glance tells your brother, "I am more important than you", you can never say to him, "I love you"'. The communion of saints is not a fusion of persons; it is a matter of seeing Jesus' link with everyone. Besides, the call to missionary work comes from this. Libermann wrote:

**What love of predilection for those fortunate people that Jesus attaches to himself in unbreakable bonds of love, for his bonds are really of love; the same bonds unite the angels and Saints in heaven to the Blessed Trinity.**

All the members of a family do not march to the same beat. An apostolic community is growing; some run, some hurry, some plod, some apply the brakes, according to each one's gifts and generosity. The Lord alone knows the hearts. Our way is 'to accept each other as different, to love each other as complementary'. The Lord's Spirit in these days is inspiring Christian groups to become genuine communities of mutual love and help in the faith, with the different lay ministries undertaken by all: catechesis, care of the sick, help to families, and so on, each one being responsible for all in a diversity of gifts. The apostolic community can say to such groups: 'See, your high ideal is not imaginary, since we, who are all so different, live together'. *'That all may be one... that the world may believe that you sent me'* (Jn 17:21). To this end, the community will be open on occasion to interested religious and laity, to priests from the area, in order to understand pastoral situations and different cultures.

Finally the community will know how to relax as a group. The festive aspect of life is an element in self-development. Sometimes problems can arise simply because the community never took time to

relax together. Some indispensable structures have to be set up for this, however flexible.

The advantages of community living are sometimes contrasted with the needs of the pastoral ministry. Some people live alone and gradually become isolated. The wisdom of those in charge has to note those situations and encourage regional communities, and encourage those living alone to make a community with people working alongside them in the apostolate. But Fr Libermann's thought is unequivocal:

**The missionary commits himself to the Congregation only on the condition of having a community life. He does not make his commitment with a bishop but with the Congregation represented by the superior general... and so the superior cannot give subjects to a bishop except on that condition, which is a real tacit contract (ND IX 99, 188).**

The Spiritan community must become more and more what it is. It will be attractive at that price. *'We will go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'* (Zach 8:23). This takes for granted an unending conversion on the part of each of us.

#### D - COMMUNITY DISCERNMENT

The question of community discernment arose. Discernment means finding out what has to be done and how to do it in the light of the Word of God and the signs of the times. The Spirit impels us to creative fidelity, and inspires the apostolic community along the main lines of its life and missionary work. How is discernment carried out?

Fr Libermann gave advice on this point in a letter to M. Briot in 1845:

**When you have to undertake something important, weigh the matter together in the presence of God. Begin by discarding all prejudices, favourable or unfavourable. Do not give in to haste, rush nothing, weigh well in a spirit of faith what has to be done and reason out the matter. Put your trust in God in your undertakings, but be neither presumptuous nor misled. Your soul must be led in faith but your mind, thus strengthened, must reason out matters, act maturely and deliberately. Leave nothing**

**to chance, foresee all possibilities; but, once you have taken measures, put your trust in God alone... always leave something to providence (ND VII 193).**

We are to seek God's will together. What does God want of us, of this group that we are? This searching cannot be done once and for all. It is not enough to come together and discuss themes like prayer or community life. That would be merely human. There has to be also a genuine spiritual approach. Each must come willing to discern in the Spirit. To want to force one's own opinion through is no longer to listen to the Spirit. The necessary spiritual disposition would be to admit I have something to learn, to be ready to be changed by the discussion, to be challenged.

God will not guide us to intelligent decisions unless we have done the preliminary spadework and seen the possible solutions. This is done before the discussion, so that each person arrives informed, otherwise the operation will bog down in unessentials. Ample time must be taken for prayer, reflection, and recourse to the gospel so as to have its point of view. All that done, we listen to each other in the Spirit. In 'round table' discussion each gives his opinion without being interrupted or contradicted, and indicates the spiritual path that led him to this or that solution. It is important to hear the gospel point of view that led a confrere to his choices. Tensions may arise, which will need time to deal with, time for a conversion of some of those taking part. Spiritual seeking always involves mutual conversion. It should lead, not to a surface-unanimity in common decisions, but to unanimity of gospel motivation, gospel communion, over and beyond opinions that may be and remain divergent.

#### E - SPIRITAN ASSOCIATES

It is surprising that so little has been done in the Congregation to develop a Spiritan life-style in conformity with our founders' ideal among the laity. The Franciscans have a Third Order, the Benedictines Oblates. Libermannian spirituality can speak to the Christians of our day. There have been lay people and priest-associates in our history, both in the 18th and 19th centuries; in 1895 married lay people were admitted as associates. Archbishop Le Roy, then vicar general, who had requested it, was thinking especially of African catechists and other workers. Our confreres in Canada, in Montreal and particularly

in Toronto, have groups of lay Spiritan associates very committed to the spirit of the Congregation. Other Spiritan groupings are coming to be in other places. Fr Henry Koren, the Congregation's historian, sees Canada once again playing 'a crucial role' in this, as it did in early Spiritan history. He says not to worry about the theoretical basis to the facts. 'With Fr Libermann I am convinced that good theories are born of practice and not vice versa'. There is a reference to these associations in the new Code of canon law, no. 725.

In a parallel line of thought, some confreres recalled that certain Congregations are related to our family by reason of their founders and the Libermannian spirituality they live, like the Holy Ghost (Spiritan) Sisters, the Missionary Sisters of the Holy Rosary, the Congregations founded by Fr Le Vasseur, Fr Delaplace, Bishop Kobès, and the young African Congregations founded by Spiritan bishops. On the level of spirituality, mutual contacts would be desirable.

#### F - INCULTURATION

One of our African confreres pointed out the cultural values of his people as a sociological contribution to the apostolic community. He recalled that Pope Paul VI praised three characteristics of African culture: the spiritual meaning to life, the sense of the family, and the sense of community. The sense of community, in particular, is very strong. The talents of each one are meant for the common good, directly or indirectly. 'To exist is to live in the group, to see things in the group, to do things with the group' (Francis Arinze, *Sacrifice in Igbo Religion*). The elder is a respectable and respected person, for old age is held sacred; young people must show older people the marks of respect. As for the chief, he must love the members of the community, be a person of wide experience, knowledge, openness, prudence, sincerity and zeal. That is his standing. Hospitality and liveliness are other community values, and gratitude to the men and women who have served the community. All these cultural values help the Igbo Spiritan community and can help other communities of the Congregation. What matters is respect for each person, so that a confrere will never feel left out, crushed, or simply neglected, since he is a living member of the community.

It is clear that we can all be enriched by the cultural contributions of our different districts and provinces. Intercultural dialogue would help everyone. While that is true, there are also negative aspects of



local customs. We must stress what is creative in our cultures but not neglect the necessary ruptures. We are challenged by different community styles, but it is still Christ who gathers us together, and the gospel demands of the apostolate.

It was remarked that Fr Libermann, without crossing the oceans, had moved from one world into another, from one culture into another, had experienced transcultural situations. What a shattering transition from the Jewish ghetto of Saverne to the Christian clerical world of St Sulpice! His father cursed him when he learnt that his favourite son was baptized a Catholic. 'I renounced my father rather than my faith', said Francis (ND VIII 203).

We will close this chapter on the same act of faith in Christ. Our times are no more difficult than those the first community of apostles knew. There are new world-problems, certainly, but, as at Caesarea, we have made our choice: *'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'* (Mt 16 : 16). We are not left alone to find solutions. God is in charge, his fidelity is our guarantee. *'God is faithful, and it was he who called you to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord'* (I Cor 1 : 9). Each Spiritan community gives thanks to the Lord for the great gift received.

'Two "marching orders" sound out from our entire Spiritan history:

- *the mission is the work of God*; let him act, be open to his action, to the promptings of the Spirit; God has his hour, he has his plans, he has his ways;

- *the mission is the work of a community*; let us draw our strength from a faithfulness shared with others; let us help one another, give mutual support to one another, encourage one another, work together' (Frans Timmermans, superior general, Letter to Confreres, January 1977).

## Chapter III

# SPIRITUALITY

### I – OUR FOUNDERS' COMMON INSPIRATION

The spirituality of our founders, Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann, is at the heart of the Spiritan charism. The sameness of the inspiration of both is striking. The first wrote little on the subject, but he was at the starting-point of an interior way of holiness followed by his disciples throughout the history of his Society: the spiritually poor who let themselves be guided by God's Spirit. The second developed his thought in thousands of letters and marked out an interior way of holiness based on his own experience, whose essence was the science and art of letting oneself be led by God's Spirit in the same attitude of spiritual poverty; when he founded the Holy Heart of Mary Society he had the genius to adapt this interior way to the needs of missionary life, integrating the spiritual life and the apostolate in a marvellous way. For each of them, finally, Mary was model and support in faithfulness to God's Spirit. This simple, luminous way of holiness was opened up by the first and mapped out by the second. It is the way that the Lord in his providence offers to those he calls to the Spiritan life.

It seems that Fr Poullart des Places inherited his devotion to the Holy Spirit not from his friend, St Grignon de Montfort, but, as Grignon himself did, from Fr Louis Lallemand, through the Breton missionaries trained in his school. The opening lines of the Rule for these young clerics read:

**All scholars will particularly adore the Holy Spirit, to whom they have been specially dedicated. They will also have an outstanding devotion to the Blessed Virgin, under whose protection they were offered to the Holy Spirit.**

In the *Spiritual Teaching of Fr Lallemand*, published in 1694, Fr Champion gives the notes taken at his conferences by Fr Rigoleuc fifty

years earlier. Lallemant, master of novices of the Jesuit tertianship, having died in 1635, his followers had spread his teaching throughout Brittany, where it spread like wildfire. Lallemant's two poles of spirituality were purity of heart and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the first a means, the second an end.

'The goal we aspire to, after we have been a long time trained in purity of heart, is to be so possessed and ruled by the Holy Spirit that he alone will lead all our senses and rule all our interior and exterior activities; and we will surrender ourselves completely by a spiritual self-denial of our wills and satisfactions. Thus we will no longer live in ourselves but in Jesus Christ, loyally corresponding to what his divine Spirit does in us' (*Spiritual Teaching*, p. 176).

Now Claude Poullart had studied two years of law at Nantes, where Fr Champion directed a retreat house which Claude certainly knew. What is beyond doubt is that the 'devotion', the total gift of oneself to the Holy Spirit, was the core of the spiritual life of the priests of Holy Ghost Seminary. Claude's seventh successor, Fr War-net, confirms this in a talk he gave at the Motherhouse in Rue Lhomond. 'Our Fathers were poor in the goods of the world and only wanted to be rich with the gifts of the Holy Spirit that constituted their sole treasure. And if children respect the last will of their father to the point of feeling themselves obliged to execute it religiously, must not we be inspired to conform to the will of our holy founders?... We cannot belong to a better Master than the Holy Spirit nor have a better safeguard than Mary... To be devoted to the Holy Spirit means above all to do what pleases him... We have to let ourselves be ruled by the Holy Spirit, follow his suggestions only, have no affections or intentions other than those he inspires, trust him and cast off all worries. 'He is my shepherd, I shall want for nothing'... This is how to walk in the footsteps of our fathers, guaranteed that it is the surest way to do what pleases the Holy Spirit'.

These words were obviously familiar phrases of the founder handed down over the years. They turn up again in the Rules and Instructions of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit, a Congregation founded in 1718 by one of Poullart des Places's first 'scholars', Allennou de la Ville Angevin. And note the following text, which could have come from the same pen:

**The Holy Spirit must be the sole light of your mind, the sole driving-power of your will and all your activity, the sole desire of your heart, the centre and principle of all the affections of**

**your soul. There must be no hint of anything foreign to this Spirit of holiness and love in you. Your soul must experience no sentiment or sensation or impression whatsoever, it must have no life, except in this Spirit and by this Spirit.**

Actually it is a letter of Fr Libermann's in 1837 (LS I 301). 'All the spiritual teaching of Fr Libermann is a school of docility to the Holy Spirit', said the late Fr Lécuyer in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (Vol. 3, col. 1494). Was Libermann influenced by Fr Lallemand? He said himself that he 'had read hardly any spiritual author' (ND IV 290). He spoke of his own experience when he wrote:

**I would wish you to know the theory of the interior life in no other way than through living it (ND III 73).**

At Rennes, at the moment of his greatest spiritual confusion, judging himself incapable of giving the slightest good advice, he wrote to a dear friend, M. Carron:

**Read Fr Lallemand (sic), where you will find all the principles, as in St John of the Cross. The teaching is correct, it is simply a question of putting it into practice and all will go well. There are just some things to be added for the good of souls (LS II 49)**

Let us say that, if he knew Lallemand, Lallemand's thought only confirmed his own intuitions. About those 'some things to be added' that he speaks of, he alludes to the great science — issuing from his own interior knowledge — of coming to live gradually under the Spirit of God's action. His genius as spiritual master lay in signposting that route in detail.

'With Mary, in Mary, through Mary, for Mary' (St Grignon de Montfort). Poullart des Places honoured Mary in the mystery of her Immaculate Conception, the model of purity of heart indispensable for life in the Holy Spirit. For Libermann it was the holy heart of Mary, 'a heart eminently apostolic, all burning with desire for the glory of God and the salvation of souls' (ND II 238). 'O Mary, give me the Holy Spirit, your beloved Spouse', he prayed (ND X 499). At the time of his Congregation's fusion with the Holy Ghost Society, he wrote reassuringly to one of his missionaries who seemed to fear that the holy heart of Mary devotion would suffer:



**We always put our rest and happiness in Mary's heart, filled abundantly with the Holy Spirit and, if did not articulate this fulness of the Holy Spirit in Mary's heart, it formed the essence of our devotion to her all the same. We are changing nothing of what was understood before, we are articulating it (ND XIII 133).**

It could not be better said.

This availability to the action of God's Spirit can only be grasped in an interior attitude of spiritual poverty. It seems that in this also our two founders were gifted similarly. Neither began from 'a great plan to be realized' but both were led along by providence, faithful to their interior call, wholly in God's hands and dependent on him. It is as marked in Poullart des Places when he was making the choice of a state of life during his retreat as it was in Libermann when he was 'waiting until the wall fell'. 'In choosing a definitive state of life I have no view other than to please you', wrote the former at 22. 'All I am and all I possess is for God', wrote the latter at 28. *'My heart and my flesh are a cry to the living God'* (ps 84), said the former on his death-bed; 'God is all, man is nothing', said the latter, that is to say, the more one gives room to God the more one finds the peace and real apostolic fruitfulness that come from him.

A last characteristic of those devoted to the Holy Spirit and Mary is that they try to make them known and loved. We find this last advice in Fr Warnet's exhortations in the quotation above: "Children of Mary and of the Holy Spirit, we will exert ourselves through word and example to make them known. We will get all our brothers to glorify the Holy Spirit and to honour his divine Spouse".

To glorify the Holy Spirit and honour Mary is, for the Spiritan who bears their titles and, in the founders' spirit, is consecrated to them, on the one hand to help to make them known and loved — it is our special duty towards the third Person of the Holy Trinity and the heart of Mary — and on the other hand it is to practise proper devotion to them by being led by the Spirit of God in close union with Mary. The unity of spirit and heart of our founders on this essential point is reason for thanksgiving to the Lord on the part of all Spiritans.

**As a sign of its twofold title and twofold dedication the Institute has for emblem the image of the Holy Spirit under the form of a**

dove hovering over the heart of Mary, and for motto these words of our Rules, *Cor unum et Anima una*, so as to remind its members of the union and charity that should reign among them (*Constitutions* 1,6 of 1876).

A last witness of the common inspiration of our founders, and not the least, is the consecration to the Holy Spirit, through Mary, that they proposed to their disciples. Poullart des Places had offered to the Holy Spirit all his followers, both present (they were twelve) and future, on 27 May 1703, at the feet of the Black Virgin of Paris. It was the custom of Spiritans to ratify that offering annually on the feasts of Pentecost and the Immaculate Conception.

**Holy Mary, my Mother and Sovereign, come to my help; I, your poor servant, dedicate, consecrate and devote myself to the Holy Spirit, your illustrious Spouse, in honour of whom, notwithstanding my weakness, I desire to undertake an important commitment...**

**My good Mother, hear me. Spirit all-powerful, hear my good Mother and, by her intercession, be kind enough to enlighten my mind with your light and warm my heart with the fire of your love so that, in this house consecrated to you, I may carry out faithfully all that pleases you, all that pertains to your glory, to my own sanctification and to the edification of my brothers (Joseph Michel, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*, p. 298).**

Having become a son of Poullart des Places and his tenth successor, Fr Libermann drew up an act of consecration that had been used in the Holy Heart of Mary Society, in these terms slightly altered:

**O my Mother, kindly accept the offering I make of myself. Give me the Holy Spirit, your beloved Spouse. I wish to devote and consecrate myself completely to the divine Spirit and to your Immaculate Heart. I wish to live and die, to be dedicated and immolated in the following of Jesus, in the Society of Missionaries wholly devoted to the all-powerful Vivifier of souls and wholly consecrated to your Immaculate Heart...**

**I open my heart and surrender it to the divine Spirit. May he fill it, possess it, and deal with it as sovereign Master. Under his guidance I would spread his holy love in all souls entrusted to me (ND X 499).**

While it is true that circumstances encouraged the fusion of the Holy Heart of Mary Society with that of the Holy Ghost, and that, in fidelity to the directives of the Holy See, Fr Libermann wished to surmount all obstacles, even his own followers' opposition, in executing a project that providence was entrusting to him by the voice of the appropriate authorities, it is no less true that, in a mystical intuition that only the saints are familiar with, he sensed the connection, if not the unity, of the two ideals.

**When the Holy Spirit inspires a work, he seldom gives its whole development from the start but only as occasions arise. Yet the whole development is always contained in the principle by which he leads that person in whom he inspired the work, and there is a certain connection among all the diversity (ND III 158).**

## II – THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF CLAUDE FRANCIS POUILLART DES PLACES

Claude's youth was lived in the protected atmosphere of a Christian family. Fr Thomas, his first biographer, relates that this child 'of a lively and restless temperament' was at ease in good, happy company and set up little prayer-groups. His family being successful traders, he grew up among the upper middle class of the city of Rennes. Exceptionally gifted, outstanding and respected, everything predestined him for a promising future. Two providential circumstances would especially mark his adolescence — the fact that he knew St Louis Grignion de Montfort and the fact that he met Fr Bellier, the friend of the poor. Louis Grignion, his elder by six years, was finishing secondary school at seventeen when he got to know his young friend of eleven at the Jesuit college they both attended. The two became fast friends, bound by a common love of our Lady. 'In the history of the Saints, where great friendships are common, one rarely finds a friendship so rich in spiritual fruits as the Marian friendship of our two young students' (Michel, *Claude-François Poullart des Places*, p. 20). A little later, in a student youth group, Claude would begin serving the poor in hospitals under Fr Bellier's inspiration.

At twenty-two, now qualified in law, he was meant to do honour to the family name and to marry a lady of high rank in Paris. But this ambitious aim of his father was not to be attained. A decisive retreat in 1701 induced him to consecrate his whole life to God's service. His retreat notes tell us the story.

**To you alone, O God, it belongs to touch the hearts of people. In acknowledging your power, with what effect do I also acknowledge your love! You love me, divine Saviour, and prove it in a striking way. I know your tenderness is infinite, for not even my innumerable and continuous acts of ingratitude can exhaust it. For a long time you have wanted to have a heart-to-heart talk with me. For just as long I have been unwilling to listen. You try to convince me that you want to make use of me in the most hallowed religious posts, but I try not to believe you** (*Spiritual Papers* 16, p. 17).



A beautiful prayer inaugurates his choice:

**O my God... I abandon myself entirely to you... Be good enough to show what you want me to do so that I may follow the way of life you have traced out for me. May I serve you during my pilgrimage in a way that is acceptable and may you shower on me all the graces I need to offer the glory due to your divine Majesty! (*ibid*, p. 40).**

These pages give evidence of clear self-knowledge and of his fundamental attitude of self-offering so that God's will may be done, whatever it turns out to be. Young people on their first steps along the Spiritan way have spoken recently of how much these texts, which describe the perfect disposition of one who is searching to know God's plan, have helped them. 'Speak, Lord, when you like... I have not come here to defend myself, I have come to let myself be conquered' (*ibid*, p. 17). Another prayer finishes his reflections, in which he asks the Lord to find him a director who will point out the right decision; he is determined to follow him.

**Through your holy grace grant that, like St Paul, I may find an Ananias to show me the path I must follow. I will follow his advice as though it were a divine command. O my God, do not let me make a mistake for I put all my hope in you (*ibid*, p. 51).**

The director's reply was not long coming, since a few months afterwards we find him preparing for the priesthood at the Jesuit College in Paris. He declined to attend the Sorbonne and thereby relinquished a brilliant ecclesiastical career, in which he could have exploited his natural gifts of eloquence and command. He chose the struggle against ambition and vanity. Like Ignatius Loyola he despised human glory to serve His Majesty Jesus Christ. God began to speak intimately to his heart, his prayer-life became fervent, as did his spirit of penance. Our Lord's Passion and the 'holy sacrament of the altar' became the chief subjects of his meditations. He was given the gift of tears. He vowed a special veneration for the sacraments of reconciliation and the eucharist. He says, 'I used to pass considerable lengths of time before the Blessed Sacrament; that was my sweetest and most frequent recreation'. Fr Thomas, who gives us these details,

says that he began to cut back on his food, to come to the help of those poorer than himself, and he wanted to give away everything and live on alms. 'From that time he had a particular attraction to the most hidden and abandoned works' (Koren, *Mémoire of Fr Thomas*, p. 268). This was how he began helping poor students to pursue their studies for the priesthood. Then he gathered them into a community and, a seminarian with seminarians, he founded an altogether unusual seminary destined for the service of the poorest. 'This seems to me what God is asking. If God gives us success, you can count on having missionaries', he said to St Grignon de Montfort (*ibid*, p. 262). This was the beginning of the close links between Fr de Montfort's work and Fr des Places's community, which would furnish him with his bravest missionaries. 'I will prepare them for you, and you will place them. In this way, both you and I will be satisfied'.

A fine prayer to the Blessed Trinity has come down to us from this time, found in a private rule of four pages of personal notes; he proposes to say it on entering and leaving his room.

**Most holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whom I adore through your holy grace with all my heart, all my soul and all my strength, I beg you to grant me faith, humility, chastity, the grace of not saying, seeing, hearing or desiring anything except what you want me to do and say. Grant me all these graces, my God, together with your most holy blessing. May my mind and heart be filled with you alone. May I always walk in your presence and pray ceaselessly to you as I should... (*Spiritan Papers* 16, p. 59).**

It is clear that God's hand was on him. Throughout a year and a half of sensible fervour, and of great interior purifications as well, he would be gradually freed from the obstacles to God's life and would give himself unreservedly to him whom he loved and by whom he knew himself loved, like Blessed James Laval later on at the time of his great conversion.

**Of temporal possessions I intended to keep my health alone, so that I could sacrifice it entirely to God in the work of the missions. I would have been only too happy if, after setting the whole world on fire with the love of God, I could have shed the last drop of my blood for him whose blessings were ever before my eyes (*ibid*, p. 67).**

At this euphoric moment the night of God descended on him. It was December 1704. A painful spiritual crisis developed, forcing him to come to grips with himself like an animal in its last stronghold. He has left an account of it in retreat notes entitled, 'Reflections on the Past'. They are particularly evocative.

**To sum up, I must confess before God that at the present moment I am someone who is believed to be alive but who is certainly dead, at least when I compare the present with the past. Alas! I am merely a mask of devotion and the shadow of my former self (*ibid*, p. 71).**

More than one Spiritan will recognize himself in these interior tortures in which, like the angel with Jacob, God demands all. But his suffering goes deeper, it tears his heart.

**Tears of blood would not be too strong a means of bewailing my wretchedness... Alas! I am no longer aware of the presence of God. I never think of it when I am asleep and almost never when I am awake. I am always distracted, even during my prayers... No longer do I have that readiness to speak about God... I left the world to seek God, renounce vanity and save my soul. Is it possible that I merely changed my object in life while remaining at heart exactly the same? What then was the use of undertaking this work? (*ibid*, pp. 70, 74).**

Alone in guiding his nascent community while himself a student, and emaciated by his penances, it is not surprising that he felt completely worn out. 'I had become very thin and feeble, although my health remained good'. St John of the Cross says that when a shaft of sunlight penetrates a dark room specks of dust which had been invisible begin to dance in the light. It is the same for a soul the light of God enters. Unsuspected weaknesses take on new dimensions! Incertitude adds to the anguish. Why did I undertake the work of the poor scholars? Wasn't it rash?

**It is true that I had my director's permission but here again my conscience reproaches me, as it has frequently done before. How did I present the work?... Perhaps I did not reveal the full extent of my ambitions and vanity. I have therefore every reason to fear and tremble before God... These reflections fill me with sorrow (*ibid*, p. 74).**

'There he is. The interior darkness is a visitation of God, who comes with his holiness, eliminating the residual opacity of sin. This is passive purification, which Fr Libermann would treat of eloquently in the *Spiritual Writings*. 'It is only a path to reach contemplation' (ES 182).

**It has happened to many saints that they became unfaithful after giving themselves to God generously. They did not forsake God completely but left their first fervour... But God in his mercy lifted them higher than they ever hoped. How great is God's mercy towards those he loves with special predilection! (LS II 103).**

Thus disposed, Claude Poullart would receive the grace of a purer union with his Lord, a union of wills, which he speaks of at the end of his Reflections:

**Filled with this holy confidence, thanks once more to the grace of God, I am going to examine, without taking into consideration what is most agreeable to nature, which is the shortest road to lead me back to the one without whom, whatever I do, I cannot live in peace for a single moment (*Spiritual Papers* 16, p. 73).**

'In spite of the seeming abandonment of God, in spite of the loss of awareness of his presence, in spite of doubts about his own sincerity and renewed experience of his own misery, the faith of Claude Francis was never stronger: faith in God's infinite mercy, in his tenderness and in his pardon, which could always be relied upon' (Joseph Lécuyer in *Spiritual Papers* 4, p. 16). To all his followers throughout the ages Claude Poullart thus teaches by his own experience the need to give all to God, without reserve, and let oneself be purified and shaped by him so as to be fully led by his Spirit. Dark corners of our being, stained by original sin, can only be freed in the crucible of these nights of God. It is imperative to trust the Lord's mercy and, in experimenting one's own weakness, to receive it. To be wholly taken over by God is the secret of holiness and apostolic activity.

No further intimate notes of Claude Poullart are extant. We only know that he did not have to leave the community, 'if God showed him he was mistaken'. He continued the work at the behest of his director. One may presume that his contemplative prayer led him to be taken over by the Holy Spirit. *'I will run the way of your com-*



*mands when you give me a docile heart'* (Ps 118 : 32). Ordained priest in 1707, he was swept away two years later by a fatal illness that he bore uncomplainingly, repeating the words of the psalmist, *'My soul yearns and pines for the courts of the Lord'* (Ps 83 : 3). His true portrait, sketched on his death-bed, reveals God's peace in his features.

Both in the Rules of his Society and in the act of consecration and the spirit behind it, it is clear that the Holy Spirit had become 'the soul of his soul' and that Mary had helped him towards the total donation of himself to the life-giving Spirit. The results were tangible: the lasting imprint of his work for 145 years; 1500 missionaries sent to the most abandoned during that period; the high quality of training given in Holy Ghost Seminary, and by its professors on loan to other seminaries; the exemplary fidelity of the Spiritans to the Church — not one took the betraying oath of the French Revolution. This is the faith and zeal of those who continued and continue today to witness to the same call and spirit that were his. 'Such was the holy and famous Fr des Places, founder of the Holy Ghost Seminary in Paris' (last words of Fr Besnard's manuscript, about 1770).

### III – THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF FRANCIS LIBERMANN

‘To speak of spirituality’, Fr Libermann wrote, ‘you need a prayerful life, a grace of the Holy Spirit and experience; the knowledge must be experiential and not speculative’. Libermann was a mystic above all, his method was existential. He was speaking from experience when he held forth on the ways of spirituality or when he said he had received lights for others. But he also felt a special mission towards his own missionaries to show them the ways of God.

**Do not condemn the word of your poor wretched father . . . God has given me the grace to direct in his ways the servants he has chosen, whom he wishes to sanctify for the salvation of poor souls (ND XIII 404).**

This ‘word’ comes to us somewhat unpolished, but it is not too hard to reach what Montaigne would call the ‘substantive marrow’ of his thought.

Was he influenced by the French School of spirituality, in particular by de Bérulle, de Condren and Olier? He had ample knowledge of it, since he was training the seminarians of St Sulpice according to their founder’s spirit. ‘To have the spirit of a Society, one must try to have that of the founder’ (ND I 385), he said with regard to Fr Olier. Having come upon the Christian thought and terminology — and even, in part, the French language — in that atmosphere, it was to be expected that he would assimilate the redundant Sulpician style of the time. That is no surprise. Indeed, a comparative study of Libermann’s spiritual approach with other authors can only enrich our understanding of both parties. But Francis Libermann is unique. His way the Lord directly inspired him with, he undertook it without affectation. Destined first for young people preparing for the priesthood and their directors, it would providentially enlarge its horizons from that basis to become a source of spiritual guidance for his missionaries. Using his own statements and following the steps of his life, choosing from his occasional confessions and discovering his own life-experiences in the advice he gave others, we will try to trace his spiritual development; it should make our own path in his footsteps somewhat clearer.

## A – EXPERIENCING THE POWER OF GRACE

Francis Libermann's fundamental interior experience was the gratuitous overwhelming power of God's grace. The Jewish faith in which he was brought up in Saverne was characterized by the fact that God is all. *'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone!'* (Deut. 6:4). This conviction, which grew through constant contact with his father, the rabbi, in the shadow of the neighbouring synagogue, would become, from the moment of his baptism, a profound experience of being possessed by God.

**When the holy water poured over my forehead, it seemed to me that I was in the midst of an immense globe of fire; I was no longer living a life of mere nature; I saw and heard nothing more of what was going on around me; things impossible to describe were happening within me (ND I 90).**

Fr Adrian Van Kaam, C.S.Sp., Director of the Institute of Spirituality at Duquesne University, in his fine biography of Libermann, *A Light to the Gentiles*, comments as follows: 'With such a dramatic display of divine power operating in his soul, Jacob — now Francis — realized better than most of us that life takes on full meaning only when one gives free rein to the workings of this heavenly force in the depths of his being' (p. 28). The globe of fire was the epiphany of the prophetic word taken up in the New Testament: *'For our God is a consuming fire'* (Heb 12:29), not without analogy to the burning bush where Yahweh revealed himself to Moses. God came to him directly, as with Pascal on the day of his conversion, 'sensible to the heart'.

God's free, loving attentiveness provoking an immense thirst for himself was matched by the neophyte's absolute sincerity in surrendering himself unreservedly to God. Commenting on Jesus' words, *'If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink'*, he cries out:

**O my Lord Jesus, I hear your cry. You call me, Lord; here I am; I thirst. Great is my thirst, even to fainting... give me to drink from your fountain of salvation (CSJ 338).**

On the same text of St John he continues:

**Jesus calls those who thirst and he himself is parched with thirst... Jesus thirsts to give them to drink through the abun-**

**dance of his love for souls... This thirst is so immense that the burning desires of all parched souls together cannot be compared with that of Jesus for each one of them (CSJ 338).**

Now no one can find his happiness and absolute desire in creatures around him; how could the empty fill the empty? They increase his thirst, 'leaky cisterns that have no water, and the little they have is putrid'. '*Come and see*', said Jesus (Jn 1 : 39), inviting all those who wish to experience his friendship. He draws them interiorly to follow him and stay with him. This moment is capital, for, says Fr Libermann, 'the first step should be a burning desire to possess our Lord; the greater the thirst, the more it is destined to be slaked far beyond its wildest dreams'. Fr Libermann attaches great importance to these 'strong, pressing drives towards God' in the beginnings. The grace of holiness is there in germ, it needs care not to be stifled by pusillanimity. If one's desires are excessive, these are the excesses of the great saints in their first steps along the way of divine love.

**One of the effects of Jesus' love on entering a soul is to make it insatiable... He stirs it up and draws it along, he takes over its will to attach it firmly to himself...**

**Those who have the honour of belonging to the divine Master will read their own story in these verses, or the story of Jesus' goodness, gentleness and love (CSJ 46.49.50).**

Taking the example of the apostle Andrew, he explains how someone touched by God's gift becomes an apostle in turn:

**The apostle Andrew had an immediate burning desire to share his happiness with those dear to him... This is what normally happens to people just drawn to our Lord (CSJ 51).**

Intimacy with Jesus is nourished by listening to the gospel, on condition, he says,

**that we enter into the heart of the meaning of each word, and make it our own in the presence of God and by the light of the Holy Spirit (CSJ 391).**

Just once, twenty years after his baptism, he spoke his mind confidentially about it in a letter to a novice of the Holy Heart of Mary Society, Jerome Schwindenhammer, who was complaining of not



reaching a higher state of prayer, 'on condition that you speak of this to nobody, and that you burn this letter three days after receiving it'. A happy indiscretion, no doubt prompted by Jerome's brother, Ignatius, who would be Fr Libermann's successor as superior general, has preserved this extraordinary confession of the power of grace in his life.

**I must tell you, then, that I never made mental prayer on the virtues, even on the virtues of Jesus and Mary, that I was never able to draw a conclusion or take any resolution to practise the virtues, at the end of my mental prayer. I could never even reflect on the virtues in order to know what to do or teach. . .**

**In short, nothing in me by way of knowledge in the intelligence, will-power, or the practice of virtue, has been acquired. God gave *everything*. He drew me along without asking leave, with a violence that I have not perceived in anyone up to now. This is so true and clear that if I lost the faith my mind would never be able to deny the presence and activity of grace on my soul. . .**

**After that, our good Master came unexpectedly to snatch me from myself and held my faculties absorbed and captive for about five years. During all this time I had no thought of working at any one virtue. My whole preoccupation was to be with him, and that came very easy (ND VIII 202).**

In a long letter to his nephew, Xavier Libermann, who had become a Spiritan, he spoke freely about his personal prayer-life, inviting him simply to accept God's grace, 'which accommodates itself to our nature'. 'At first I was in affective prayer; I passed through the most ordinary as well as the most intense degrees' (ND XIII 132). He described these degrees in detail in his treatise on affective prayer. Laid hold of by God, thirst for God, attachment to Christ 'so as to see him, listen to him, enjoy the graces he fills us with' — this was the first step in his spiritual journey.

## B – PURIFICATION OF THE SENSES

The purifying of his sensitivity would coincide with two painful events, one moral the other physical, not without repercussions of the first on the second. First there was the curse of his father, the rabbi,

who treated him as dead and cut off from the family, once he learnt of his conversion to Catholicism; then there was the massive fatigue of his nerves, soon to turn into fits of epilepsy. Descendants of the Libermann family have recently told us how poignant the rabbi's pain could have been on learning that his favourite son had become a Christian, but the extreme violence of his father's reaction provoked serious tension in Francis' psychic equilibrium. He read his father's terrible words during a recreation period in the seminary courtyard. He was declared dead, cut off from the family, cursed forever. A seminarian who saw him in tears heard him repeating, 'But I am a Christian'. 'In the midst of his tears', wrote the seminarian, 'there was the smile of happiness' (ND I 130). Rabbi Libermann died of sorrow two years later without ever forgiving his son.

Francis, now kept out of charity at St Sulpice Seminary, without human support or future hopes, let God take over in his life. The wholly Near One is also the wholly Other. He blocked the way of his future and dulled all religious sensitiveness in his trial in order to unite him thoroughly to himself in the darkness of the night of the senses. Francis' attitude would become that of abandonment, of availability, of uniting his will to God's in unshakable trust. He wrote to his brother, the doctor:

**My dear sickness is a treasure for me, why are you upset over me?... My body, my soul, my whole being are for God; and if I knew that there was still a little vein in me that was not for him I would tear it out and trample it underfoot in the mud and dust... All I am and all I possess is for God and for no one else but him (LS I 10).**

One feastday in the seminary some young students were speaking of their outbursts of piety and joy during the morning ceremonies, 'while I', said Libermann, 'I have passed the day as cold as a stone, unable to speak to God, to think or feel anything' (ND I 308). He gave to understand that that was his normal condition, accepted resignedly with a sort of joy. Later on he wrote to Fr Carron, who was undergoing a similar trial:

**It is the night of the cross, of privation, of interior darkness where the senses are no longer active but deadened. This is the moment to live by faith, faith full of hope... I mean a living faith that simply produces interior acts of the soul and keeps**

close to our Lord and his divine words, that refers all it does to divine love, to please God all the time. There is excellence in this night; souls are made perfect in it and gradually lose their notable faults (LS II 266).

By means of these trials Francis was stripped of everything. Autobiographically he wrote to a friend:

**God loves you tenderly, that is why he keeps you on the cross of pain.**

As for many great people in the Bible, it was the events of life that drove him to total surrender to God's will. In telling a correspondent how to react he describes his own procedure:

**What you have to do at present is avoid becoming upset by these fears and pains. Let them be, out of love for our Master, with peace, gentleness and love. Remain in your littleness before him who is your salvation, and at the same time arm yourself with limitless trust in his divine goodness and mercy that cannot be matched...**

**Humble trust is important (LS II 216).**

He warns against discouragement, no matter what our faults and weaknesses. Consent to surrender to love.

**Enter most deeply into your interior self and never come out. If you do that, your joy will be full and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ will flood your soul... For in so far as you remain withdrawn thus into your heart of hearts you will always find the Holy Spirit there, who will lift you up and transport you to the top of that mountain of love... He will work marvels for you (LS I 126).**

He described this interior progress towards self-surrender into the hands of God — which can be taken as his own path — in two famous letters, one to M. de Conny, a seminarian of St Sulpice, and the other to M. Levaillain.

**Up to now you have been in the habit of working on your own, and considering your work and concentration of some value. This explains why you become discouraged when you see your**

weakness. But once you have abandoned yourself into God's hands you will grow accustomed little by little to seeing your great uselessness and incapacity; you will recognize that God alone should be and do all things in you, and you will throw yourself headlong into his arms, with a clear sight of your own lowliness and poverty. You will take delight in that view, and then you will begin to make some progress (LS II 231).

Never let yourself be discouraged by your weaknesses. Whenever you think you have committed some fault, reflect back gently on yourself; then present yourself before our Lord in great but gentle interior humiliation at the sight of your miseries. But it is essential that this sentiment be accompanied by filial love, by the desire to please him, and by full, gentle confidence that, far from being angry with you, he will take pity on your weakness, misery and poverty. That done, stay calm and know that you are still all for Jesus and Mary. All this to be done gently and peaceably, with a loving glance.

St Thérèse of the Child Jesus would say sixty years later, 'a glance towards Jesus, remembering his mercy, mends everything'.

**I know that you will not succeed at first. Time and fidelity are required. But fear nothing. Our Lord has opened a door for you and led you through, he will guide you to the end (LS II 208)**

'To the end' — until God's Holy Spirit takes over in us. 'There is no real greatness', he concluded, 'except in that heavenly life of divine love'.

### C – DOCILITY TO THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Francis Libermann staked everything on God's infinite love. To requite that love was not to galvanize human activity with inflexible recipes of behaviour techniques, but to let oneself be carried away by love, removing the obstacles, surrendering to its powerful action. 'Surrender' is one of his pet words.

**It is not that you should be gentle, but that Jesus should live in you with his spirit of gentleness and calm (LS II 29).**



**Who has ever understood the height, the breadth, the length and depth of the knowledge and greatness of Jesus' love? (LS II 283).**

**Maintain a firm, stable and persevering will to love and serve God with all your soul (LS II 219).**

It is an attitude of passivity, a dynamic kind of passivity, that consists in collaborating with the powerful action of the Holy Spirit, who gradually takes over.

**This union is passive on our part. God, giving us life through his Holy Spirit, unites us to himself while we have nothing to do except make ready and, when ready, offer no resistance (ES 480).**

We have reached the year 1831. He was told to leave St Sulpice and look for a post elsewhere. When he replied calmly, 'I am happy to have no resources other than God alone' (ND I 159), the council of the seminary decided to take responsibility for him and send him to their house at Issy-les-Moulineaux in the suburbs of Paris as messenger-boy-cum-gardener at the bursar's service. Here he had regular contacts with the directors and seminarians, as well as with the servants, one of whom, the doorkeeper, became his best disciple, and with the sick in the infirmary, whom he joined when he suffered his epileptic fits. His reputation soon spread. 'Where does his great virtue come from?' One of the seminary directors who knew him well, Fr Pinault, declared, 'He knew what it was to love and be loved; the hand of God was on him'.

Francis had 'crossed the threshold' of complete surrender to the Holy Spirit. This expression of the seventeenth-century Jesuit, Fr Lallemant, which became classical in spiritual literature, would describe what characterized his life henceforward. The Spirit of God was leading, enlightening and strengthening him. He spoke fluently of the science and art of being led by the Spirit. It was a time of interior euphoria, when the presence and life-giving activity of God's Spirit grew within him, what might be called the time of life in the Spirit. All the wise advice he gave about it was the fruit of his own clear diagnosis of what was taking place.

We have a letter from this period to an unnamed addressee that was destined to become a veritable circular for his friends. It betrays

the heart of Libermannian spirituality: docility to God's Spirit living in us. Who was in a better position than he to speak of it?

**All you have to do is keep yourself docile and pliable in the hands of the Spirit of life, whom our Lord has placed in your soul to be your all. He must be the principle and unique source of all your affections, all your desires and all the movements of your soul; he must be the driving-power of your mind and the guide of your soul through the movements he implants there. It pertains to him alone to give you any impetus or impression whatsoever, and it pertains to him also to get you to put that impetus or impression into practice, for if you mix your own violent activity with it you will only spoil everything (LS I 366).**

What the conditions are for this life in the Spirit he makes clear: recollection and self-denial, in an atmosphere of gentleness, trust and peace. He defined recollection as habitual presence to God and presence to oneself. Presence to God is practised as an exercise in times of solitary prayer and as an act lasting throughout the day. Presence to oneself presupposes habitual mastery of one's own reactions and natural violence, and the radical gospel imperative of self-giving: he *'must deny his very self, take up his cross each day, and follow in my steps'* (Lk 9 : 23).

**In order that all the powers of our heart may be surrounded, wrapped around and filled with the Spirit of Jesus, we must be dead to ourselves and everything. He wants to be the soul of our soul. We should let him act in us as our body lets our soul act...**

**Do not strain to unite yourself more or less perfectly to God. The uniting of our soul with God is our Lord's work, and not ours...**

**Without the Holy Spirit, all your effort and all your work will be useless, even harmful; for the more you labour to obtain this union with God the more will there be of your own activity, and the more there is if your own activity the less will there be of the Holy Spirit's activity (ND III 102).**

The passivity he preaches is a loving, active disposition. He multiplies images to express it: to be as a child expecting everything from its mother, as clay in the potter's hands, as the statue in the sculptor's hands, as the anvil before the blacksmith. We must wait for God's

moment, be willing to be led, be patient in trials, not go further than grace calls us, accept God's rhythm, whose ways are not our ways.

**Moderate your interior actions in some small way so as to keep your soul in perfect stillness and remain always in tranquil and interior attention to the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is in you (LS I 74).**

Time freely given to prayer alone is obviously indispensable. He expatiates on its varieties and characteristics. Coming later than prayer of affection, this is now prayer of simplicity and pure faith. It simply means a peaceful calm in which one is ready for God's insights and ready to follow his Spirit.

**Pay particular attention to adoration; if that is fervent, everything will be fervent.**

**The more the Holy Spirit is active in your prayer the more perfect it will be.**

Little by little, with time and perseverance, prayer influences life; and life, more filled with the Spirit of God, influences prayer. Fr Libermann sees it as a give and take: our prayer-state is determined in activity.

**Go to God as the kind of person you are in time of prayer.**

**We must not pray by our own strength and desires; let the Holy Spirit ask in us and for us. We should surrender fully to his moves and indications (ND I 501).**

The day before big feasts Francis Libermann was accustomed to prepare a meditation for the prayer-groups or 'bands of piety' of the seminary. On the vigil of Pentecost he gave the following reflection, which found its way later into the *Spiritual Writings, Supplement*, p. 79. The conditions he lays down for life in the Spirit are those he lived. This is his finest summary on the point:

**If our Lord gives us his Holy Spirit, it is not so that, even partly, we may live according to our own spirit. He must be our leader, our love, our all. Since the quality proper to this Spirit is to be God's love, it follows that everything in us must proceed from this love, be accompanied by it and go straight to God. He has been given to us to be the life of our soul...**

**If we want to hear and see him and go forward under his guidance, we must attend to his inspirations, keep our glance continually turned towards him, practise interior silence, that is, of all our passions and of all the faculties of our soul, avoid too great interior action... wish to know no other wisdom or prudence than what comes from the Holy Spirit, and by this interior path avoid all natural efforts to become united to him...**

**All this must take place in complete peace and tranquillity of soul, and it is in this disposition that we must await from him whatever he will please to show us and have us carry out, always in readiness to follow and never precede him.**

The Christological aspect of Fr Libermann's spirituality has been rightly noted. The Holy Spirit always leads us to have 'no heart, soul, body, life or being except for Jesus and in Jesus' (LS II 112). Jesus bears us along into his Father's love. The whole long commentary on chapter 10, verse 38 of the *Commentary on St John's Gospel*, to cite only one example, has a strongly Trinitarian flavour in which his Hebrew culture and Christian inspiration converge; it is 'an exegesis that prays', as Fr Blanchard put it. Libermann's pneumatology leads straight into the heart of the life of the Blessed Trinity!

**Everything for the greater glory of our heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ our Lord, through his divine Spirit, in union with the holy heart of Mary (*Provisional Rule*).**

How is the Holy Spirit's action to be discerned? Fr Libermann indicates many ways. The Holy Spirit intervenes through the will, 'nature' works on the mind. The best criteria are humility of heart and fervour of will. Besides,

**the divine Spirit acts uniformly; his action is coordinated and without agitation; further, it draws us to union with our Lord (ND III 89).**

Nature produces rush, grace produces peace; nature tends to stiffness, grace to gentleness.

**Strength and mildness, there is divine action; it is also a summary of all apospolitic action (ND II 124).**



Anything conducing to discouragement is not according to God.

**Someone who belongs to our Lord should have a joyful heart and a serene mind** (ND IV 430; letter to his niece, Pauline).

This was his own portrait; his contemporaries at the seminary unanimously attributed these virtues to him. One of them, Fr Perrée, who became a priest in Marseilles, made this deposition at the beatification process: When any of us was out of sorts, the others would say, Go and see M. Libermann and all will be well... We used to compare what we were reading about the saints with what we saw in M. Libermann and were struck by the resemblance. We knew he would do great things in the Church for the glory of God (ND I314).

## D - DARK NIGHT

The night of the spirit is a purification of the higher faculties by a direct intervention of God leading to perfect union. For people active in the apostolate it comes at a moment when the apostle, who is already familiar with the ways of the Spirit and accustomed to living under his guidance, sees, on the occasion of his ministry, the very motivations challenged that led him to the total gift of his life to God. It is a time of strange darkness. God does this to show the apostle his own light and his own mode of presence and action. The apostle, for his part, accustomed to discerning the Spirit, retains the sureness of God's presence in his heart, a totally liberating presence that dispenses from debts and establishes definitive peace. Ordinarily this approach of the Lord is the prelude to a special vocation in the Church, evident or not. This grace was given to Francis Libermann at Rennes in 1839. At that time he was at the service of the Eudist Fathers Society, which had asked the seminary of Issy to let him be their novice master.

What exactly happened? Did he meet opposition or even hostility? Did his extreme sensitiveness overdramatize difficulties that were merely pedagogical? Did his intuitions influence his judgement? Or was it simply that his terrible sickness, epilepsy, which was back in force, felled him?

All these human factors are doubtless real, but the evidence points once again to Someone else who '*laid his hand upon him*' (Ps 138). He, the famous spiritual director, saw himself criticized, contradicted by the few novices and even by the superior, snubbed by one of his

dearest followers; he no longer seemed able to touch hearts; he felt useless in the Church of God, even harmful.

**One thing I am persuaded of, that I have done great harm to all the souls it pleased our Lord to put in contact with me (ND I 502).**

He experienced grief and loneliness when 'the weakness of his nerves' gripped him again in humiliating circumstances. It spelled failure, mysterious and troubling. Further, he seemed to be deserted by God.

**There were moments when I thought our Lord was going to desert and reject me... No book I ever read, and nothing I ever heard, recounted anything like this. He is Lord of all things, and it is not for me to question him about his methods. It was his pleasure to show me in the circumstances our extreme uselessness and incapacity (ND I 502).**

In a letter that would be the key-text of a Libermannian anthology, he establishes a long parallel between the self-satisfied apostle who thinks himself 'useful to God' (sic!) and the 'crucified person', a burden to himself and others, who is regarded with indifference, pitied 'out of charity', who knows his poverty in all humility, and who 'in this way begins to enter into God's holiness' (LS I 59). It is obviously his own moral portrait of the moment! His surrender to the divine will just keeps on growing.

**I surrender and commit myself to the heavenly God to do whatever seems good to him, with me and with everything. In life and in death, for time and for eternity, everything for him alone and in him alone; may he alone with his will live and reign in all and everywhere.**

'He alone' is a regular phrase from his correspondence (ND I, 500, 674). 'I have only God alone'. At this juncture he formulates this prayer, that takes its meaning from the circumstances of the time:

**My Jesus, you know well that I am nothing, that I can do nothing, that I am worth nothing. Here I am as you find me, that is, a poor nobody. Take me, if you will be good enough to show**

**that mercy. I abandon myself and hand myself over into your hands and I ask for nothing more (LS II 392).**

From then on he was totally dependent on God, with a dependence that was loving, joyful, peaceful, forbearing. He had espoused the gentleness and humility of the heart of Christ, he would spread abroad its spirit in all his dealings with others, he would become an authoritative leader with a balance, assurance and certitude that came from outside himself. Once again, it was events that brought on this kind of trial, but Francis Libermann read them in the light of God and benefitted from them.

From Lyon, some time afterwards, he wrote a detailed account to Fr Carbon of his state of soul at Rennes. It is worth listening to, as this type of interior experience has been felt since then, in other circumstances or under pressure from other events, by more than one of his followers. It happens in the heat of action, unforeseen and unforeseeable.

**I had come from the seminary in Paris, where the good God had blessed everything I did...**

**I saw myself absolutely of no value and incapable of doing anything for God's glory...**

**The trouble that the running of the novitiate caused me was so great that I never thought I could put up with the like. But I must say that the greatest of all was to see myself useless in the Church of God. I really saw this, it was not imagination. At the same time I had such a desire to work for God's glory that that was the most painful cross. I passed all that year without hope or consolation. But I could not resist the burning desire pushing me all the time to do something for the glory of our Lord and his holy Mother (ND I 674).**

This 'something' would take the form of the project of a missionary Institute. The rest is history. God fashioned his instrument accordingly; he was ready for the great work he would give him, the salvation of Africa! He was now completely at God's service, completely flexible for leading others. On October 28, 1839, a particular interior illumination was granted him by the holy heart of Mary, to let him know the place destined for him in the Church. His friend and confidant, Fr Tisserand, expressed it in these words: 'This day he would always look back on as one of the happiest in his life, the day

the decision was taken to found the missionary Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary'. He set out for Rome. There he composed this limpid prayer:

**O most holy and adorable Spirit of my Jesus, let me hear your gentle voice. Refresh me with your precious inspiration. O divine Spirit, I want to be before you like a light feather, so that your breath may carry me where it will and that I may not offer it the least resistance (CSJ 89).**

It is hardly possible to speak of Fr Libermann's spiritual life without emphasizing the capital role Mary played. Libermann saw Mary as the living example of fidelity to the Holy Spirit, living more and more under his guidance as the days passed.

**May Jesus live in you as he lived in Mary; may we be united to Mary as she was united to Jesus (LS II 425).**

It is the Holy Spirit who will accomplish this.

**What a great thing it would be if the Holy Spirit brought about in our souls a holy union with Jesus in Mary, and with Mary in Jesus (*ibid*).**

At baptism he obtained an exceptional love of Mary as a gift from the Holy Spirit. His Marian experience is at the root of his gentleness, patience, zeal, and influence. The affective side of his relationships and correspondence may be attributed to her. 'Mary gave him peace in distress, her presence in his loneliness, fervour in his interior life, his prudence as director and his boldness as a victor. Everything was possible with her... Fr Libermann's physiognomy is a harmony of St John's gentleness and St Paul's energy, of St John of the Cross's radicalism and St Francis de Sales' sureness' (Pierre Blanchard, *Le Vénérable Libermann*, vol. I, p. 561).

## E - UNION

In 1840 Francis Libermann was 38 years old and had been fourteen years baptized. His remaining twelve years would be given over to founding, leading and administering his missionary Congregation.



**I have left Rennes for good... I have left Rennes to begin the Work for the Blacks... Despite the interior drive, I wanted to know the divine will about the foundations of our work and to use the most assured means for that, as God has set out in his Church. This explains why I came to Rome at the beginning of 1840, where our Lord placed his most important people for governing his whole Church (ND VI 38).**

a) *At the Service of the Church*

In Rome he waited for the Church's decision through the human mediation of the hierarchy. He waited for the Church to pass judgement on his charism for his particular circumstances. He had received his missionary vocation from God, now he wanted to receive it from the Church. The visible Church and the Church of the Spirit are inseparable.

**I find my great joy and endless consolation in the fact that the Holy Spirit is in charge; he leads the leader of the Church and those who help him governing it (ND VI 45).**

**If one undertook only easy things in the Church, what would become of it? (ND II 170).**

His little Society would be a cell of the Church, in its service, 'a faithful servant of our adorable Master in holy Church' (ND II 284). Its mission would be 'to widen the boundaries of the Church' (ND VI 76). Our founder's spirit is an ecclesial spirit, that made him defer the big decisions of the Congregation to Rome (Memorandum to Propaganda Fide, the fusion, the colonial bishoprics). It is ecclesial, too, because the Congregation's mission is included in the Church's, which it wishes to serve faithfully.

**We must be generous and not fear for the good of our little Congregation. We must work for the spread of the Church, in the order of things where we are (ND VI 76).**

b) *The Holy Heart of Mary*

In these dispositions, 'waiting until the wall falls', he wrote the *Provisional Rule* and the *Commentary on St John's Gospel*. In his Roman attic everything became clear from the moment he decided to consecrate his work to the holy heart of Mary. He relates that, from

the beginning, his work of founding was bound up with an extraordinary trust in Mary, with particular reference to her most holy heart.

**On the one hand, our project appeared folly to me according to the lights of reason; on the other, I felt a strong impulse and a sentiment of great trust in the holy heart of Mary (ND III 267).**

Historically, devotion to Mary's immaculate heart is associated with St John Eudes' spirituality, and then with the vast conversion-movement associated with the shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Refuge of Sinners, in the church of Our Lady of Victories in Paris. Mary brings sinners to conversion, she opens up fields of apostolate, especially in difficult areas, and she inspires the evangelizing of far-off countries where she gains spectacular victories. It suffices to read some letters written in Paris by Fr Desgenettes, the parish priest of Our Lady of Victories, to see how, at this time of enthusiasm for the missions 'ad extra', the great missionaries concentrate on the immaculate heart of Mary as model, support and advocate of apostolic activity.

For his part, Fr Libermann never had a moment of doubt. In the Provisional Rule, article 3, he wrote:

**We will consider the holy heart of Mary as a perfect model of the apostolic zeal we must be devoured with and as an abundant and ever-open source from which we can draw. We will have recourse to it all the time with the greatest confidence so that it may cover us with the maternal tenderness with which it loves us, and obtain a great abundance of grace for all of us and our works.**

He attributed to an immediate intervention of Mary's heart the choice of mission territory where the Congregation would go to work. At our Lady of Victories he asked Mary to choose, and spoke of his request to Fr Desgenettes. The next day, at the same shrine, Bishop Barron came to pray to our Lady to find him priests for his huge mission territory of West Africa. He too spoke to Fr Desgenettes, who introduced the two men to each other, and the mission of Guinea was born!

**One of the rules I bind myself to in doing business is to wait for the moment of Providence. I am quite sure that with the help**

**of the prayers of the immaculate heart of Mary my approach will always succeed (LS III 368).**

He also likes to offer Mary as model of the apostle through her sufferings.

**See the immaculate heart of Mary. What sufferings she endured for the world's salvation! Mary did not go out to preach the gospel of her Son but she suffered in her heart. That was Mary's apostolate.**

The immaculate heart of Mary means Mary wholly given to the love of God and love of all people. The heart is the symbol of love, and the word 'immaculate' reveals an aspect of a privileged gift which we sinners look to as an ideal, towards which we look with a child's trust that his mother will give everything, without fail (always the element of absolute security, in life and in death!) The immaculate heart of Mary is all tenderness and mercy, echo of God's tenderness and mercy, bringing people to conversion to Jesus by its intercession — *omnipotens supplex*, says St Bernard — through sure and lasting victories.

The first missionaries of the Holy Heart of Mary would die in Africa with her name on their lips. In their heart they felt that their bold enterprise could only succeed with the certainty of Mary's affective and effective presence, leading and sustaining those whom God sends out so that Jesus may be known and loved by all peoples. We are far from dealing here with a simple devotion; this is a genuine inspiration willed by the Spirit of God, to become for today's missionaries a wonderful gift to understand and treasure.

### *c) Practical Union*

In 1841 Francis Libermann was ordained priest and opened the first novitiate at La Neuville. Candidates flocked to it. There was the enthusiasm of first foundations — an unparalleled generosity of young people ready to lay down their lives. 'We do not want weak souls in this completely apostolic Congregation' (ND I 662). He would work on many fronts: training his missionaries and organizing the missionary work, then extending the works of the Congregation, the fusion with the Holy Ghost Society, diverse pastoral activities and a gigantic correspondence. He had entered into that phase of intimacy

with Jesus that St John of the Cross calls perfect union, whose most characteristic sign is imperturbable peace in the midst of consuming activity. This is the step of definitive union. Someone remarked to him one day, 'It seems to me that all this activity you have must work against your habitual union with God'. He replied:

**On the contrary. Since I raise my soul to God to ask his help at every new task, it means that the busier I am the more my union with God is strengthened (ND I 521).**

At this stage 'the supernatural life has become, so to say, natural' (ES 554). In a letter of October 5, 1840, which treats of studies, he distinguished purely natural knowledge and purely supernatural knowledge so as to come to what he calls 'mixed'.

**This is acquired when someone seriously applies his natural faculties to study on a purely supernatural principle like that of pleasing God and doing his holy will, full of trust and in a spirit of recollection and love for God.**

That was how he lived himself. From the novitiate at La Neuville he wrote a particularly revealing letter about his own sentiments.

**How happy we are when we are under the Holy Spirit's power, under the total influence of the Spirit of Jesus' love! Everything becomes love in us: love for our God, love for people, without judging them; our mind is calm, unperturbed by those who upset or contradict us. Good people or bad, people who agree with us or who do not, nobody can prevent our mind from resting in God, or stir up discontent in us, whether he be right or wrong (ND III 88).**

Yet again he was drawing his own portrait when he wrote to the Dakar community in 1847, describing a soul that wholly belongs to God:

**When it achieves success it is humble, calm and moderate, it does its duty with perseverance and fidelity, it consolidates what it has done.**

**In times of storm, or lack of success, it can wait for God's moments, it takes care not to be discouraged; sadness never, irritation never, spite never, neither against itself nor against others.**



**It always remains true to itself; filled with God, it can be patient like God. It does not wish for success greater or more quickly than God wishes it. It examines a state of affairs with calm and in the spirit of God, it acts according to its lights and the strength it obtains from on high, and it leaves its Master the care of bringing its works to fruit, according to the measure of his mercy for them (ND IX 328).**

Difficulties continued to abound, trials and even catastrophes like Guinea. Francis Libermann raised fallen spirits, armed himself with patience and spread hope around him.

Apostles of Jesus Christ are not weaklings, shaken by adversity. In a letter to Bishop Kobès, that is a sort of charter of the apostolic spirit, meant for all his missionaries, he explains himself:

**I see now more than ever that our life is to be one of complete sacrifice. We must come to such a stage of self-denial, in little things as in big, that we are unmoved by whatever happens. We must be ready for all pains, privations, sufferings and difficulties of every sort, standing up straight before God in peace, humility, gentleness, full of trust in God's mercy.**

**We must despair of nothing, take pride in nothing, moderate our joy in success and be patient in adversity; be calm in all things, as people who rest in God alone, who are doing only God's work, without any satisfaction for themselves, to the extent that, if we rejoice, we rejoice in God and for God, because he has accomplished his plans; but our joy will be gentle and peaceful if we do not succeed, if we are stopped in our tracks (ND XIII 352).**

He has left us a beautiful page on the missionary's prayer. He describes at length the difficulties of recollection from climate, tiredness, physical weakness — how realistic for one who never set foot in Africa! — and insists on the life of union. Mental prayer he considers the means, union with God the goal.

**Take the case of a missionary who is dead to himself and wholly for God, without limit or reservation (for that must be taken for granted if we are to speak of the quality of his prayer). This missionary makes forty-five minutes or one hour of meditation each day. It is often extremely difficult for him to harmonize a felt, burning, continuous attentiveness to God with the fati-**

gue of his organism, the habitual distractions of his mind, the multiplicity of his occupations and the want of an affective sentiment of his heart. Naturally he will have a fund of habitual recollection, but there is a long way with great difficulties from that to a complete recollectedness in God that can be felt.

In accordance with what I have just said, the soul inspired by grace will be united to God in the ordinary actions and moods of life by faith, hope and charity. These virtues, becoming the driving-force and soul of its activity in the different relationships of life, are the cream of the supernatural virtues. This is the basis of the soul's union with God and the essence of its holiness. We take great care with it, so as to give it all the scope, intensity and perfection it is capable of, according to the plans of God's mercy (ND XIII 410).

From this kind of advice to his missionaries about prayer he arrived at what he would call in 1851 'practical union'. He explains it in chapter five of the *Instructions to Missionaries* and in his last conferences to the novices (ND XIII 697-702). He did not speak of it in his letters, doubtless because he felt the need to explain it at some length, for in the long run it was a compact phrase, heavy with meaning, to express the last position of a doctrine. What had become so familiar to himself he tries to hand on in all its aspects. What matters, he says,

is to live all day long in practical union with God; not only doing one's holy duties in the spirit in which they should be done, but also exercising a gentle and peaceful guard over oneself, and accomplishing everything according to God's good pleasure in a spirit of faith and love. The missionary's joys, difficulties, sufferings, works of zeal, and even failures are lived in the Spirit of God (*ibid*).

This presupposes a long apprenticeship, self-training, a profound attitude of love, a surrender to the Holy Spirit — in short, a whole previous spiritual journey.

Practical union, then, is that latent state of union with God that influences the quality of our apostolic activity by motivating it with faith, hope and charity and rises to conscious prayer at opportune times. It is the fruit of long exercise (ES 487). 'Time is needed to reach it, but once one is there it is a blessed life' (ND XIII 705). Prac-

tical union involves degrees, efforts and renewals, it takes a winding route, with ups and downs, according to divine grace and each one's response. 'But right from the start all have to surrender themselves to the control of the divine guide by relinquishing their judgement and their own will — at least in intention — as one does on getting into a bus or train. Throughout the journey we let ourselves be brought, and we do not interfere with the driver. The intention to 'let oneself be brought', that is the first condition for 'practical union' (J. Le Meste, *Libermann et l'union pratique*, *Spiritus* 22, p. 39).

To describe the way to practical union would mean summarizing all Fr Libermann's spirituality. The last retreat he gave at Notre Dame du Gard, in June 1851, offers a synthesis of it. It was published under the title, *'Little Treatise on the Interior Life'*.

**The practice of the interior life consists in a gentle loving presence to God. The interior soul is habitually turned towards God in a calm, simple, humble way in all its activities. It tries to act only under God's command and initiative. It expects everything from him, refers everything back to him, sees God in all creatures and all creatures in God. In its dealings with other people all is divine love, zeal, peace, understanding and humility. Its activity is peaceful, recollected, full of meekness, simplicity, reserve and gentle seriousness.**

This last stage of union with God involved also, for Francis Libermann himself, an evolution, a growth in depth. The signs, as always, were greater humility, more ardent zeal, a wisdom more and more inspired by the Holy Spirit. He was able to recognize his faults, often apologized and asked pardon for the pain he provoked, especially when he rebuked his missionary bishops; he judged himself unworthy of leading the Congregation and directing spiritually so many different kinds of people. He said, 'one must never get impatient for the glory of God'. This spirit of humility took the form, in his dealings with people, of greater gentleness, more patience, goodness towards all, especially those he called 'the less refined', putting up with the faults and limits of his colleagues and all those who crossed his path. About the difficult Fr Arragon, he wrote to his young superior at Dakar:

**If you wanted to make Fr Arragon moderate, polished, amiable in his manners, you would be undertaking an impossibility, it would be easier to stop the sun in its course! (ND VIII 113).**

Fr Libermann said about Fr Laval:

**Laval who is a saint and keeps saying he does nothing.**

Again, about a confrere who was finding no satisfaction in his ministry:

**This is normal with humble souls, who never see the good in what they accomplish.**

Freed from all agitation, bustle and preoccupation, he took pains to warn his missionaries against the same things, recommending them 'to put themselves in the presence of God before undertaking anything important', 'to go forward in interior peace', 'to act with patience'. It was his own approach. He wrote to Blessed Anne Marie Javouhey:

**We must have great desires and strengthen our souls in difficulties, but not torment ourselves if success is slow in coming. We must not wish for good to be done more than God wishes, or otherwise than he wishes. After doing all we have to do, we depend on him for success, and happily take whatever comes.**

All the writings that date from 1851 show what astonishing familiarity he had with God a few months before his death. In the flush of this, he poured out letters to his missionaries, unhappy as he was at seeing the young bishops immerse them in disproportionate apostolic activity, severed from the deepest mystery of their call.

**These poor young men, having left their countries to be missionaries, have always kept the notion: 'I am a missionary above all'...**

**If they are holy religious they will save souls, if they are not they will do no good, because God's blessing is attached to their holiness (ND XIII 353).**

He also sees in the light of God the holiness and work of all his followers, present and to come, if they are faithful to the message the Lord gave him both for himself and for them. He sings his thanksgiving by entrusting them all to the Holy Spirit and the holy heart of Mary. He too trusts them, for he knows their generous hearts! Fr Le Vavas seur wrote about Fr Libermann at this time: 'The more we know him, the more we admire him. What prudence in doing busi-



ness, what sureness of vision, what peace! He possesses a calm, a strength, a patience, a courage that come from God. He is not a learned man, nor a great orator, but he has much more, Jesus' life and spirit within him' (ND XIV 151).

Those who frequented his company at Rue Lhomond in Paris, as Mgr de Ségur said, felt they were with a saint. The same Mgr de Ségur left us his pencil-sketch of Fr Libermann on his death-bed, which is, according to those who knew Libermann, the most faithful portrait of him. In Libermann's last days, Fr Desgenettes, parish priest of Our Lady of Victories, said the same thing to a friend, 'let us go and see how the saints die'. His own followers already thought the same.

In one of his last messages he invited his missionaries to offer themselves as redemptive victims. He considered that sharing in Jesus' redemption was an essential ingredient of the missionary vocation.

**Yes, I offer my sufferings for you, for all, for all of you, and for Guinea**

— he said in his last moments. Many of our confreres have followed suit in this sacrificial offering of their lives at the last moments, specially for the missionary work the Lord gave them.

His last spiritual experience, if we may put it that way, was a rapture that seized him for a whole hour before he died, as eye-witnesses observed it, a sort of ecstasy that prefigured his final union with the Lord face to face. He died with a last cry of longing, 'My God, my God'. Evening Prayer of the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, February 2, was being sung in the nearby chapel. The words of Mary's canticle, the Magnificat, could be clearly heard in the dying man's room. While the choir was singing 'He has raised the lowly to high places', Francis Libermann was called to continue Mary's Magnificat with her at the throne of God in the glory of the saints.

## IV — A THREEFOLD CONCLUSION

Tracing Francis Libermann's spiritual development, we come upon only three mystical favours, all very brief: that of the ball of fire at his baptism, that of the interior enlightening of 28 October 1839 at Rennes, and the ecstasy of his last hours. Like the graces of St Ignatius Loyola, they were purely personal gifts. On the other hand, as with Ignatius for the Jesuits, all his spiritual life enlightens and inspires us who walk in his footsteps. His spiritual way was marked by a simplicity that makes him resemble St Thérèse of the Child Jesus, but in Libermann it all happened in the midst of apostolic missionary activity. He wrote:

**A cardinal principle of the spiritual life is to simplify things as much as possible. The simpler and more harmonious our conduct is, the more perfect it will be.**

Our second conclusion is something discernible like a watermark in the stamp of his spirituality. God's instrument is purified and united to him at the very heart of activity, through the circumstances and happenings of the apostolate. And it would take the same form in his disciples! We must learn to decipher God's ways in the big events that punctuate our spiritual itinerary. Libermann was mystic and man of action at one and the same time, blazing the way his missionaries would follow.

Thirdly we would point to the relevance of the serious, prayerful life led by Fr Libermann and taught by him to others. In these days of spiritual renewal, when the Person and action of the Holy Spirit are being rediscovered, Libermann's spirituality, consisting of spiritual poverty and submission to the pervasive influence of the Holy Spirit, joined as it is to a fine psychological approach, is found attractive to those who come upon it. It is particularly suitable for missionaries in this time of change. Libermann's message can be fruitful in the Church of our days.

Fr Cabra, President of the Italian Conference of Religious, said at a recent interview: 'The future does not belong to us, it belongs to the Holy Spirit and so to the saints. They have to show us the way. Whatever is new, the saints do it. They harmonize God's expectations and ours, the world's questions and God's answers. We need more of them today; what matters is to prepare the way for God's saints'.



## Chapter IV

# APOSTOLATE

### I – THE SPIRIT OF PENTECOST

*'Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations'* (Is 42 : 1). Isaiah attributes two characteristics to the one whom the Lord destines to be an apostle. 'God is pleased with him' in his Son, whose consecration and mission he prolongs, he is the object of special care, he has been chosen and prepared 'to bear fruit'. To know he is loved gives him sureness, constancy and peace. Jesus says to him: *I no longer speak to you as slaves. . . Instead, I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father. All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete* (Jn 15 : 15.11).

And God sends his Spirit to rest on him, to fashion his apostle to Christ's mentality and way of loving. The Holy Spirit is the Father's best gift, who reveals the Father to the apostle and enables him in turn to reveal the Father. The task of him whom Jesus calls a second Paraclete is to get the disciple to understand Jesus' life and message, impart the truth to him and deepen his faith. That is how St John presents him. In St Paul the Holy Spirit acts in the heart, configuring the disciple to Jesus, making him a son in the Son. If this is true for the apostle, it will be true for those to whom he is sent. *'All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God'* (Rom 8 : 14). *'Since we live by the Spirit, let us follow the spirit's lead'* (Gal 5 : 25). He acts in a sevenfold way, as Isaiah had already observed. *The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord* (Is 11 : 12).

The chief actor in Christ's historic mission was the Holy Spirit; he directed everything. In effect the 'mission' is whatever he does in this world, the light he concentrates on Jesus Christ. The 'mission' is the privileged place of the Spirit, since the Church grows through it. The



missionary work of the Church began at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is the fire that sets alight and the wind that bears forward, the breath of God. As Jesus was 'filled with the Holy Spirit' to accomplish his mission, so Peter is said to be 'filled with the Holy Spirit' to speak to the people about Jesus; likewise Stephen and Barnabas. '*The Holy Spirit descended on all those who were listening*' (Acts 10:44). He is in the mouths of those who speak and in the hearts of those who listen. 'It is the Holy Spirit who, today just as at the beginning of the Church, acts in every evangelizer who allows himself to be possessed and led by him. The Holy Spirit places on his lips the words which he could not find by himself, and at the same time the Holy Spirit predisposes the soul of the hearer to be open and receptive to the Good News and to the Kingdom being proclaimed' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 75).

The Spirit often intervenes in the Acts of the Apostles to guide missionary activity; he 'fell' on Cornelius and his household, he told Philip to enter the Egyptian's chariot. '*The disciples could not but be filled with joy and the Holy Spirit*' (Acts 13:51). At times he intervenes with a 'no' to a new plan. '*They tried to go into Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them*' (Acts 16:7). 'The Spirit of Jesus' arranged the itinerary. What is particularly clear is that he leads the Church by enlightening and enlivening his apostles' hearts and giving them the strength to bear witness. The accounts of the martyrs attest to this, but also many pages of our Spiritan history. Jesus said, '*You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes down on you; then you are to be my witnesses. . . even to the ends of the earth*' (Acts 1:18). You will be my witnesses to the extent you are filled with my Spirit; my Spirit, ever present in you, places on your lips, in your eyes, in your behaviour, the words, looks and attitudes that allow the Spirit, who is present in those you come to, to free them and make of them in due course children of God. '*Peace be with you, receive the Holy Spirit*' (Jn 20:21).

At the moment of leaving his disciples, Jesus did not give precise instructions about methods and means; for example, he did not state clearly what to do about non-Jews asking to be baptized. He gave them to understand that the Holy Spirit would guide them as circumstances arose and he invited them to scrutinize 'the signs of the times' and make them the base of their praise and thanksgiving (Lk 10:17-25).

'Libermann's spirituality of full availability to the Holy Spirit' (Paul VI) may be reduced to two 'fidelities': fidelity in living a prayerful life — the Holy Spirit is the 'soul of our soul' —, and fidelity in

our work, especially missionary activity, for the Holy Spirit is also the 'soul of the Church' (Gay, 'Libermann, Jew According to the Gospel', English edn, 1983, p. 85 and note). In 1851 Fr Libermann wrote a letter to Fr Lairé at Grand-Bassam that describes excellently the activity of the Holy Spirit in the missionary's heart:

**The African people will not be converted by the efforts of clever and capable missionaries, they have no need of them. It is the holiness and sacrifices of their priests that will save them.**

**Be holy as Jesus was holy. This is the one and only way to redeem and sanctify souls. May Jesus' Spirit enliven all your actions, may he form all the sentiments of your soul, may he mortify and moderate all turbulent vivaciousness of your mind, all the hard or rigid sentiments of your heart, in a word, all that is passionate or unruly in your soul. May he communicate to your heart the gentleness and humility of which the divine Master gave us the example.**

**Oh, how important is this gentleness and humility of heart, and how few people possess it!...**

**A missionary who would have these two virtues deeply graven in his soul, and would incorporate them into all his dispositions and ways of acting, — that missionary would be sanctified by the Spirit of God. But he who lacks these two great virtues is a monster in the apostolate of Jesus Christ, even had he the zeal of St Paul and St Francis Xavier, because the foundation is missing. The Spirit of Jesus cannot enliven him (ND XIII 144)**

He also gives us to understand that the missionary will often find himself confronted by the spirit of evil ready to defend its positions, for *'our battle is not against human forces but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above'* (Eph. 6: 12). There is no human way to make a success of it, only the sheer strength of the Spirit of Jesus.

## II – THE LORDSHIP OF JESUS

*The eleven disciples made their way to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had summoned them. At the sight of him, those who had entertained doubts fell down in homage. Jesus came forward and addressed them in these words: 'Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth; go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you. And know that I am with you always, until the end of the world' (Mt 28 : 16-20).*

The Risen Jesus possesses a power that transcends time and space throughout history. 'The Lord's authority guides human history' (Léon Dufour, *The Resurrection of Jesus and the Easter Message*, 1971, pp. 137-144). The nations are called to recognize this Lordship of Jesus; the apostle is the humble instrument to bring this about, he lives it himself, proclaims it and encourages it wherever he is sent, but with the sureness, certainty and hope of being unwaveringly supported by Christ — '*I am with you all days*'. He knows that it is not he who makes the seed to grow, the dough to rise, that a little salt gives the savour, that his little light is reflected far beyond his own candlestick, that his fruitfulness is inexhaustible because of 'him who loves him'.

Strong in this conviction, St Peter declared in the first flush of Pentecost: *This is the Jesus God has raised up, and we are his witnesses. Exalted at God's right hand, he first received the promised Holy Spirit from the Father, then poured this Spirit out on us. . . . Therefore let the whole house of Israel know without any doubt that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified.* (Acts 2 : 32-36)

The Spiritan wants this Lordship recognized by all. It is his great concern. Consumed by God's love, he wants to see him known and loved, but not like those who 'travel over sea and land', as Jesus said to the Pharisees, '*to make a single convert. . . twice as wicked as yourselves*' (Mt 23 : 15), not like those who think they can tot up the number of the saved, for God's salvation transcends the number of the acknowledged disciples of Jesus, but rather as one who is completely possessed by the Lordship of Jesus and leads to it those entrusted to him. *God has given me the grace to be a minister of Christ Jesus among the Gentiles, with the priestly duty of preaching the gospel of*



*God so that the Gentiles may be offered up as a pleasing sacrifice, consecrated by the Holy Spirit* (Rom 15 : 15-16).

The Spiritan is aware of the usual objections to missionary work: the existence of the great religions, salvation assured by God to all people of goodwill without explicit knowledge of the gospel, the need for 'missionary work' in one's own country, even the counter-witness — that pains the missionary so much — given by that country or continent or Church he comes from. But, most of all, he lives by that interior experience of the Father that Jesus hands on to him: *No one knows the Father but the Son — and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him* (Mt 11 : 27). He knows that true life and happiness lie in that knowledge, in the biblical sense, of the Father, in intimate communion with the Trinitarian mystery, that every person has the right to, and he the duty to proclaim. *'Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and him whom you have sent, Jesus Christ'* (Jn 17 : 3).

To follow Christ the Apostle is to follow him as liberator of all people, respecting their worth and dignity, open to human progress, to the development of poorer countries, to reconciliation, in view of the full acknowledgement of his Lordship. 'Besides, what is Christ's Lordship if not the slow growth of his work of love, peace and liberation in the hearts of people and in the great forces of history, until the final level God wants humanity to reach?' (Tillard, *In the World, Not of the World*, p. 195).

*'Because of the increase of evil, the love of most will grow cold'* (Mt 24 : 12), said Jesus. Evil, *anomia*, is the absence of law, the exaltation of selfishness, with its consequent injustice, oppression, hate and wars. The opposite is *agape*, disinterested love that brings one to understand, share and lighten the burden of others, a love that is in God and comes from God. For the apostle, Jesus' Lordship is the sign of love, of what John Paul II calls 'the civilization of love'. It is because the Spiritan believes in the power of love, because he knows that love will triumph sooner or later, that he has dedicated his life to love, in order that the Lordship of love may be known and lived by all, until the day when *'he will hand over the kingdom to God the Father'* (I Cor 15 : 24). His vocation transcends his present place of apostolate. He has given his apostolic heart to all people of every time and latitude so that in union with Christ he may bring them to enjoy the benefits of redemption, according the *'the mystery, the plan'* (Eph 1 : 9).

There is a Spiritan tradition upheld through courageous and persevering activity, of establishing as soon as possible a local hierarchy,



which we would then serve to the best of our ability until it stood completely on its own feet. Fr Libermann wrote in 1844:

**To form a local clergy is the most useful and important thing we can set ourselves to with all our strength (ND VI 276).**

He recommends his missionaries to learn the language of the country, to respect the local culture, to launch educational establishments and boarding-schools, and above all to train catechists; he even asked power for the bishops to confer tonsure and minor orders on these catechists.

In many countries we are at a transitional stage of missionary work. A local Church has been born, thanks to the heroic dedication of those who went before us. It is grown up, and has its patent letters, a plan of the apostolate; a huge step has been taken. A mission which came from elsewhere has become a mission growing from the soil. What was planted will bear fruit, 'a fruit that will contain simultaneously the qualities of the imported grain and the taste of the local earth' (Yves Raguin). Little by little the young Churches will develop their personality, preserving both their own different characteristics, through inculturation, and the universal character of their faith, by relating to the whole Church. More than ever the missionaries are at the service of the local Church. This is their glory and magnificent vocation, more disinterested and committed than ever. The bishops declare their need of the missionaries, but more and more under the form of sharing between Churches and particular ministries. Collaboration with the local Church is certainly an urgent call of the Holy Spirit today.

Our reflection led us to notice that sometimes the missionary tends to be more enterprising and authoritarian than he should be, instead of drawing out the creative responsibility and originality of the Christians in his care. Fr Libermann said: 'Be with them as servants should be to their masters' (ND IX 91). And we heard another call: to live the spirit of selflessness and poverty of Jesus. There is always a danger that methods of power used to proclaim the gospel may discredit its true meaning.

The missionary works for unity between Christians and among all peoples. He witnesses to the Kingdom of Christ, who wants to demolish barriers and divisions between peoples and races, *'who made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier of hostility that kept us*

*apari*' (Eph 2 : 14). The Spiritan would be a witness of that universal dimension of love. Understanding and adapting, loving and receiving, he is both donor and beneficiary. That is what Blessed Fr Laval was on Mauritius Island, a 'gatherer' of races and social classes. He worked through his catechists and lay apostles, men and women, whom he trained in depth in the confessional! Besides, it is striking that the two of our confreres whose merits have been recognized by the Church and at whose tombs so many graces are being obtained, Blessed James Laval and Fr Daniel Brottier, have been, one on the missions and the other at home, consumed by the charity of Christ and love for all people. It is a further sign that the Lord is speaking to us through them.

Wherever he is, the Spiritan is called to make the Church grow by building and encouraging Christian communities in which lay people are closely linked with ministry, where they accept their responsibility as Christians according to their baptismal priesthood, and allow the priest to undertake his rightful work of spiritual leadership, in the spirit and methods of the gospel. Of course, this task will never finish, but it is marvellous to see our confreres give the best of themselves to it, whether in the slums of Brazil or in the heart of Africa or in a Detroit parish. To give better witness to this, some of our confreres have set up international communities.

Spiritans are privileged to have in their founders, and in Fr Libermann remarkably, spiritual masters who could lead those providentially entrusted to them along the road to holiness. It is the art of arts spiritually to train and sustain priests, men and women religious, active lay people, catechists, the young and the old. Many Spiritans have this gift, which doubtless should be encouraged among us as a choice ministry. There too, there above all, the Church is built up. In the Provisional Rule (VII, 1) Fr Libermann wrote:

**We will consider the sanctification of priests as one of the most important points of our ministry.**

For all that, we can never forget the vast masses of people in this world who know not Christ. The missionary carries the burning thought of them in his heart. He knows that, to them too, the Word must be brought some day. He rejoices with his younger confreres who have recently opened up outposts of first evangelization, even in new countries, those who witness to Jesus Christ in Moslem countries by their charity, leaving all hope for the future to God — 'I know in

whom I have believed'. He knows one can be fruitful in the mystical Body of Christ without visible results but, in the peace and confidence of those who await everything from their Father, he begs in prayer that 'his kingdom come'.

**A soul truly handed over to God... does not wish for success greater or more quickly than God wishes it (ND XII 328).**

**You do not come in your own name, it is not you who are doing the work, it is he who sent you. You are not alone, he is always with you if you are faithful... An apostle of Jesus Christ cannot be beaten by obstacles (ND VI 3).**

## III - EVANGELIZATION

'Evangelization is a complex process made up of varied elements: the renewal of humanity, witness, explicit proclamation, inner adherence, entry into the community, acceptance of signs, apostolic initiative. These elements may appear to be contradictory, indeed mutually exclusive. In fact they are complementary and mutually enriching. Each one must always be seen in relationship with the others' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 24).

Spiritans are committed to the four aspects of contemporary missionary enterprise as they were discussed at the SEDOS seminar in Rome in 1981: proclamation, dialogue, inculturation, liberation.

Genuine *proclamation* of the gospel is a witness that many Spiritans live by word and action, or simply by a life of gospel values among non-Christians. Proclamation is also a listening, a discovery of the Spirit of God in a people, a presence that preceded the missionary. The light of the gospel can continually illuminate the signs of the times to indicate the language that he who proclaims the gospel should choose in his place and circumstances (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4). The goal of proclamation is twofold: to extend the visible communion of the Church in a people, and to recognize and acknowledge the values of the kingdom in a culture, while denouncing what is not of Christ's kingdom. Another element of the proclamation is the courageous defence of the rights of the poor and refugees wherever they are violated. Finally, wherever the gospel has never been heard, there lies our Spiritan mission to 'extend the Church's boundaries' (Fr Libermann).

The second aspect of the current missionary enterprise is *dialogue*. By dialogue the missionary tries to find the Christ who is already there in other persons, religions, different ideologies, even agnostic. This is not a diminished form of missionary work, an expedient when direct proclamation of the gospel is impossible. It is missionary activity, an approach to the mystery of the other that can occasionally become a dialogue of prayer. Dialogue presupposes faith in the interior workings of the Holy Spirit in human hearts. It is helped by an understanding of the other and his prejudices through interior silence, humility, little gestures, concern for the person rather than for results. By this inconspicuous apostolate, our confreres who have received the call prepare for the Holy Spirit and thus for providential mysterious



ways into the future. We may often have to enter, too, into dialogue with missionaries of different Christian Churches inspired by a common apostolic motive. Dialogue will entail a thorough spiritual *kenosis*.

The third aspect is *inculturation*, which means inserting a humanism or a religious message into another culture without destroying it but rather in developing and expanding it endogenously. Inculturation finds its source and inspiration in the mystery of the Incarnation, as dialogue has its source in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity (Jn 1 : 1). One of our confreres attempted an approach to this theme by a reflection on the inculturation of the message and the inculturation of the messenger, along Libermannian lines. Taking his cue from two Congresses at Kinshasa, in 1978 and 1983, he pondered how the Spiritan charism in the next thirty years, which are going to determine the Christian image in Africa, could find in Fr Libermann's thought an echo of the seven strengths of the African soul.

The first is that of the divine in the human, or the divine for the human (a bishop in Zaïre has the motto, God in us and we in God), which shows African religious sensitiveness, or the 'African spiritual genius'. The corresponding note in Libermann would be God's transcendence and the vital human link with him. The second is universal mediation, through ancestors and interposed spiritual beings; Libermann's sons can offer a spiritual way of being deeply rooted in Christ the Mediator. The third is spiritual topisms and utopisms: sacred persons, places and times will be happily re-found in the Church if the priest, as Fr Libermann often asked, gives full scope to the sacraments and leads his people 'to the wells of the Saviour'. The fourth is the mystical life, whether it be lived in ceremonies of adoration or in varied forms of prayer or in a consecrated religious life, African in style; here Fr Libermann's spirituality of docility to the Holy Spirit is very relevant. The fifth is bodily mediation, with the sacred principle of life and the relationship of sickness to healing; Fr Libermann, who knew all about sickness, understood sickness and sick people 'in the divine', so the Spiritan missionary will revitalize a *diakonia*, a service, of the sick and of the ministry of healing. The sixth is respect for cultures: dance, rhythm, music, works of art; to 'make oneself all things to all' (St Paul), 'negro with the negroes' (Libermann) will be necessary. Finally, the spirituality of the family, young people being educated within the community, is an important aspect of the primacy of life; the family is the 'domestic Church' (John Paul II), its pastoral treatment is an object of the greatest concern by African epis-

copal conferences; Fr Libermann's recommendations for the Christian and technical training of African youth are well known.

In short, the two spiritual paths converge, Fr Libermann's and that of Africa. The first was marked by the passage from faith in the God of Israel to faith in the God of Jesus Christ: novelty — conversion — continuity, in such a way, for example, that the divine meaning of transcendence, already so strong in Israel, is found again at the heart of Libermann's spirituality. The second passes from faith in the God of ancestral religions to faith in the God of Jesus Christ; here again we find novelty — conversion — continuity, in such a way that, in the African subsoil, faith in Christ and the Christian life will take root.

*Liberation*, finally, is the fourth aspect of the contemporary missionary enterprise. It has become a central concern of missionary activity almost everywhere in the world. As Jesus preached good news to the poor and freedom to prisoners, the process of evangelization is a freeing of the poor. The poor are those who are systematically deprived by another group of the means necessary for living a full life, whether on the material plane or because they are deprived of their rights or are made to suffer other wants. Social analysis reveals the extent and sometimes the universality of oppression. That is why commitment to the salvation-message brought by Jesus Christ entails commitment to the liberation of the oppressed. The Asian bishops recommend 'a dialogue of life', whereby one works with the poor, or in solidarity with them, teaching them true values (they are the object of the beatitudes of the kingdom!), while helping to transform unjust structures. This is 'a constitutive dimension of the Church's mission' (1971 Synod of Bishops). In Latin America social analysis indicates that new forms of oppression must be criticized, in both socialist and capitalist regimes, and it aims at 'conscientizing' both the rich and the poor in the spirit of the gospel and with the arms of the gospel. Many of our confreres have given their life to this task of liberation; they could speak of it at greater length, but in our reflection on the apostolate we simply wish to salute their courageous ministry.

## IV – APOSTOLIC ZEAL

**Zeal is the great virtue of the apostolic life. It comes from a great love for God... This virtue, so fine and noble, means God loving himself in us, because it is a pure effect of the Holy Spirit who bears us towards him.**

**Zeal for the salvation of all people comes from the same Spirit that produces in us God's love for the people he has created, with a view to making them live with his own holiness and rejoice in his own happiness by joining them to himself for all eternity (Libermann, *ES*, Suppl. 87, 88).**

Fr Libermann wrote a twenty-page commentary on apostolic zeal that is among the finest writings on the subject.

**Take our divine Model. What was the principle of his burning zeal? It was his love for his Father. Similarly, what fed and quickened St Paul's zeal was our Lord's love... that was the love that made the apostles (Gloss, p. 145).**

The Provisional Rule calls zeal 'the essence of the apostolic spirit'. Enlivened by this zeal, the missionary is 'all the time watching to make Jesus Christ live and reign in souls', he is 'a lamb in the midst of wolves', who must be outstanding for his gentleness and holiness. In particular, the priest, who leads people to God through the sacraments he celebrates, makes God present to people by his priestly zeal.

**How can you manage not to have Jesus' authority slighted in your person? Not by worrying yourself about getting it respected, not by adopting a tone of superiority. Our leadership is a holy service, dedicated to Jesus Christ and to the people he entrusts to us (ND IV 294).**

Zeal will also enable us to adapt to new times:

**The evil of the clergy has always been, in these recent years, to become fixed in the ideas of the past. The world has gone forward, and the enemy has drawn up his batteries according to the state and spirit of the age, and we lag behind!**

**It is essential to follow the world while staying in the gospel spirit, to do good and combat evil in the state and spirit of the present age. To wish to remain cramped up in the old days, and in the habits and spirit that ruled them, is to bring our efforts to nothing, and the enemy will grow stronger in the new order.**

**So embrace the new order with openness and simplicity and bring the gospel spirit to it. We will sanctify the world and the world will join us (ND X 151).**

Nevertheless he dissuades priests from embroiling themselves in political questions, which are for lay people. He explained his thought on this point to his brother, the doctor:

**The priest should be neutral as regards the governing of this world. His politics should be God's... Our politics being politics of heaven, we would be impolitic to deal with the politics of earth (ND XII 481).**

To continue with his commentary on zeal from the Gloss:

**A popular illusion about the nature of zeal is to picture the zealous person as someone always in movement, always visibly effervescent, always beside himself. This is the idea a great many people have of St Francis Xavier, and wrongly; for St Francis Xavier, although he had a heart burning with zeal, must have been very calm; he used to pray at great length, uniting himself intimately with God (Gloss 150).**

In a famous letter to 'the community of Africa' (ND IX 324) he deals at length with patience as an apostolic virtue of the first order:

**If ever success comes easy and quick in a mission, fear for that mission. . .**

**A strong and really apostolic person is always calm, gentle, imperturbable in the midst of adversities, never sad, sullen, blunt, taciturn, a nuisance to himself and others. All these things are the faults of weak souls, self-lovers who have not discovered the worth of Jesus' cross (ND IX 324).**



He lived up to this portrait himself when he heard of the death of his twelfth missionary in Guinea, one of his best, in 1851, a few months before his own death:

**We may observe this much in what God is doing, that he wants us to remain small, not to be puffed up, he does not want us to build on ourselves or the means we have to hand but on him alone. He wants to work with poor instruments, but generous ones that are prepared to suffer all for his love, humble, exercised in self-denial, persevering through troubles, sufferings, contradictions and dangers, docile, obedient and filled with the spirit of religion, and having unshakeable trust in him. This is the point he will bring us to, I feel certain, even if that tears our hearts to shreds (ND XIII 379).**

## V - THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

‘Some are consecrated to the apostolate in the most essential mission: announcing the Word of God to bring people to the faith. Such a grace calls for profound union with the Lord who will enable us to transmit the message of Christ incarnate while speaking a language the world can understand. How very necessary is it, then, that your whole existence share in Christ’s passion, death and glory’ (Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio* 9).

The fullest theological and biblical meaning of apostolic consecration appears clearly in this text, with the need to share in Christ’s paschal mystery. The apostle not only zealously proclaims and witnesses to the good news, he is also, like him who sends him, the ‘lamb who takes away the sins of the world’. He is a redeemer with Jesus. In the name of Jesus’ passover the Father’s forgiveness comes down through the presence of his Holy Spirit on reconciled humanity in the sacrament of reconciliation. Jesus’ passover is represented in the eucharist to introduce us into his mystery of death and resurrection, to bring about, on each occasion, a new Pentecost in us, a new Pentecost on the world.

Jesus reacted against the barriers of selfishness and ambition, even institutionalized ones, when they were in opposition to authentic human values. He had to suffer misunderstanding, rejection, persecution, death. The apostolic community, in its turn, is a ‘sign of contradiction’. To proclaim the Lordship of Jesus in order to guide the world and history towards brotherhood, justice, and equality among all people will lead to sharing Jesus’ fate. Suffering and apparent failure turn into resurrection, into a renewal of life. As Jesus spoke of ‘his’ hour, each one of us has his hour, too, that will indicate time for the cross and sometimes martyrdom.

*Continually we carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that in our bodies the life of Jesus may also be revealed. While we live we are constantly being delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal flesh. Death is at work in us, but life in you* (II Cor 4 : 10-12).

At Gentinnes that last sentence is inscribed on the base of the statue of the Kongolo missionary offering his life for his people. ‘*Amid trials, difficulties, distresses... as men familiar with hard work, sleepless nights, and fastings*’ (II Cor 6 : 4-5). St Paul quotes these as the

sign of a true apostle. *'Leaving other sufferings unmentioned, there is that daily tension pressing on me, my anxiety for all the Churches. Who is weak that I am not affected by it?'* (II Cor 11 : 28-29).

With the humiliation of 'the thorn in the flesh' and unforeseen mishaps, *'he said to me, "my grace is enough for you, for in weakness power reaches perfection"'. And so I willingly boast of my weaknesses instead, that the power of Christ may rest on me. . . for when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong'* (II Cor 12 : 9-10). These are consoling words of the great apostle Paul on days the cross weighs heavy. To know the cross's value helps in bearing it. Carried by Christ it is a source of life and allows the apostle *'to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of his body, the Church'* (Col 1 : 24). The last words St Paul dictated in his prison, in the last chapter of the second letter to Timothy, are helpful for understanding how the apostle's death, like Jesus' own, was offered in sacrificial oblation in the loneliness of surrender.

**Only at the price of the death of the cross do we come to share in the spirit and apostolic glory of Jesus Christ, sovereign Lord and great model of all apostles (ND I 662).**

To share in Jesus' cross is a source of resurrection both for the apostle himself, who does so with Jesus crucified —

**It is not you who suffer, it is Jesus in you; happy the soul that possesses Jesus crucified, it possesses the treasury of all graces, the sum of all love and holiness,**

as Fr Libermann wrote to a benefactor of the missions — and for all those sent into his life by the heavenly Father in his providence, to be assisted towards their salvation: those around him, his family, those he ministers to, and all those for whom the mystery of his calling has made him a redeemer throughout the ages. Finally, his death, taken up in Christ, makes him *'produce much fruit'* (Jn 12 : 24). At this climax of the apostolate, which he will reach at his death, he will still be a principle of life. *'To be a missionary, to have been one from the world's creation and unto its consummation'* (St Thérèse of Lisieux). He can have this wish of all apostles to continue their ministry of salvation to the end of time by sharing in Christ's uninterrupted intercession for us all (Heb 7 : 25). *'Once received into their heavenly home and being present to the Lord, through him and with him and in him, they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us. . . through the*

one mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ' (*Lumen Gentium* 49).

To be able to interpret trials in the light of faith is vital. They could be a sign from God, a call to greater self-forgetfulness, a special visitation or rapture of the Holy Spirit, or a closer sharing in Christ's redemption. Many misunderstandings, disappointments, failures in professional, community and apostolic circles have no other source than that! The Lord comes face to face with his apostle, who may be too sure of his own methods, to encroach more on his heart. '*Your attitude must be that of Christ*' (Phil 2 : 5). Sooner or later, a bread of life will emerge from this oven! Still another need may be for a missionary to ask help from a brother or sister skilled in the ways of God, who will read the signs for him in the light of the Holy Spirit. This may be an essential line of action in humility and sincerity. Today more than ever before among us Spiritans, many 'second conversions', that is to say, the unreserved capitulation of the apostle to the Holy Spirit's action, may be linked to some such step.

One of our confreres elaborated a parable about rain from the skies and artificial rain. God's rain comes only in God's good time, but when making a film you have to have recourse to Billy's rain. Billy is the bright, cheery young man driving a black pick-up truck with lots of pipe in the back, followed by a tree-spraying truck whose tank is full of water. Billy's rain can be turned on and off, but it is expensive and complicated and its supply is limited. The comparison is clear. All the work the missionary does only makes sense when it refers back to God's unlimited supply and action in the world. Libermann's history deflects us nicely from any self-complacency and steers us to be fascinated, refreshed and drunk with God's abundant, profuse love. This is the great art of putting our weakness at the service of his omnipotence in the apostolate.

**Altogether we are a poor lot, brought together by the Master's will, which alone is our hope. If we had powerful means to hand we would not accomplish much good. Now that we are nothing, that we have nothing and are worth nothing, we can form great projects, because our hopes are not founded on ourselves but on him who is all-powerful (ND IV 303).**

We have a delightful letter of Fr Libermann's describing those people who 'want to have arrived before they set out':

**God stops them with all sorts of obstacles. They fall over**



**backwards but are up and off again. They continue their way, puffing and bustling along. God closes all doors and brings them to a halt... Then, little by little they surrender to his lead... they start becoming pliable instruments in the hands of God... to the glory of him who alone does good... That is the moment of God and it comes gently (ND IX 155).**

In the witness of apostolic life, Libermann introduces the notion of interior peace as essential to any spiritual advance. It does not wait at the end of the line, like fruit to be plucked, it is to be nourished all along. He himself incarnated that peace, and imparted it to the disturbed. His spirituality has been entitled, 'The Ways of Peace' (Bishop Gay's biography). To live that peace through a major trial, through some upset that really touches a sore spot, we have to surrender all — which we do at twenty with a light heart! — and surrender ourselves — which is less intoxicating at forty! Fr Libermann wrote to his future successor;

**You have two vices to fight against if you want this perfect peace: self-love and a softness towards yourself. And take prayer seriously (LS III 51).**

Peace will come through complete self-denial to anything that would be an obstacle to the Holy Spirit: absorbing professional employment, invigorating but risky relationships, ideals that are generous but too absolute. In prayer everything must be brought face to face with the essential, until rigidity, jealousy, agitation, disappointed ambitions give place to peace.

**The basic way of establishing Jesus' lovable reign in us is to have a spirit of continual prayer and peace of soul (LS II 111).**

Self-possession in the peace of God gives a whole added fruitfulness to our apostolic activity. We should be particularly grateful to God when we realize afterwards that, on the occasion of a severe trial, physical or moral, he gave us the extraordinary grace of 'crossing the threshold' with a radical and definitive loving reply to his loving advances. *'We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who love God'* (Rom 8 : 28).

We were treated to another account of how a large community, after a period of difficulties, turned towards the Lord and left itself open to grace. Grace came through the intermediary of new-style

communities in the Church (charismatic renewal, cursillos, marriage encounter), then through a series of annual retreats in which people learnt to talk to one another and come to know one another, in trust, friendship and sharing of the faith. Pastoral work with youth led to a revival of Spiritan vocations that the community, itself now renewed, welcomed in simplicity and an offer of collaboration. Young people thirst for the absolute, but seek it in witnesses who incarnate it, in community-witness centred on the Word of God. *'God's word is living and efficacious'* (Heb 4: 12). The witness element bore fruit in progressive initiation into contemplative prayer, community discernment in sharing and prayer, and finally exact catechesis that these young people could hand on to their peers. Personal discovery of Jesus led to deeper friendship with him. Then one day they are put the question: 'Have you felt in your heart any call from the Lord to serve him always?' To get things into perspective, these young people began to live together for one week per month, and later, on discovering religious life, they lived with the nearby Spiritans. The last episode of this pastoral enterprise has been to take the young to mission territory. This is done for the length of a summer, in real mission conditions and community living. More Spiritan vocations seem to be forthcoming!

This account of a 'resurrection' invites us to be hopeful, but also to personal and collective conversion to let the Spirit of God operate freely. Subsequent reflection brought out our personal reactions. 'We will bear genuine apostolic witness when God is at work in our lives... We must be prepared for the spirituality of failure, it is the paschal mystery... Nothing is impossible to God, we must just leave him room... First, I saw the apostolate as things to be done to make my consecration effective, now I see the apostolate as what God does himself, and for what he consecrates me to work with him; I have gone from my consecration to the God who consecrates me!' Praised be God!

There remains a final element of our apostolate in the Church, that of the collective witness of a large missionary Institute, to which each Spiritan contributes. There remains the spiritual sharing of each one in the apostolate of all. There remains our mutual help at all levels, especially in the faith; our sick and our older confreres play a big part in this, radiating the life and love of God throughout the whole Congregation, where each one sustains the others according to merits and gifts of grace. That too, less visible but no less fruitful, is our missionary apostolate.



## AFTERWORD

A necessity of the difficult times in which we live is to study the past with an eye to the future. History teaches that a renewal in religious life has always been the preliminary to a general spiritual renewal. It is striking that today, as in the wake of previous great councils, after the rolling and pitching of the bark of Peter, the Holy Spirit is renewing the Church in holiness. Gradually the seed will become harvest, the grain of mustard-seed will become a tree '*where the birds of the air will nest*'. The Spiritans, as many prophetic signs indicate, are called to be in the midst of this renewal, first because their spirituality 'deserves to be offered to the Christians of today' (Cardinal Villot) and then because their 'option for humankind' (Puebla), which is their charism, shows how the Church wishes to serve the new humanity.

We are being called to serious conversion, both as persons and as communities and Institute, the former always preceding the latter in the Church's life. It is a question of a simple availability to God's Spirit who comes to make use of us. A confrere was saying that a first step for each Spiritan would be to thank God for what he is living through, here and now, despite the difficulties and sufferings he comes up against, a step into the great reality that life is, namely, God's immense love of predilection for us — God's rain! Thanksgiving opens the door to contemplation. To read our story in that light is to waken up to the full meaning of our Spiritan consecration! 'The wonderful gift of our vocation is this mysterious loving choice of God who comes to reveal himself in our life. If only we can let God love us and seek in union with him the real strength to be witnesses of his kingdom in the world of our time!' (Fr Bartolemeo Sorge, *Bulletin UISG*, no. 57, 1981, p. 13).

Since the Council we Spiritans have been trying to adapt our structures and direct our apostolic activity according to 'the signs of the times'. This was a first step in renewal. Now we are invited to 'revisit the original inspiration' (*Perfectae Caritatis* 2), to a 're-foundation', as one of us put it. Great reforms in religious Institutes are equivalent to new foundations, replete with first fervour, generosity and enthusiasm. Institutes that have accomplished this have lasted.



In view of what the Church fundamentally is, our apostolic communities are called to evolve — through deeper and more genuine interpersonal relationships — towards being real fraternities, with Christ's faith and love as foundation, whose very existence is a Christian witness, even in societies hostile to the gospel. This community renewal will breathe an original dynamism and freshness into the Congregation for the brave new world of the 2000's! Vibrant communities, throbbing with the Spirit of God, directed towards the poorest, will yet attract generations of youth!

But obviously this step has to be preceded by a spiritual renewal of each person. The Holy Spirit is calling us to that. Attentive observers of the new foundations of apostolic life that are springing up in the Church today note these traits: great trust in the Holy Spirit, and desire to let him do the leading; a stress on the worth of persons and community, with each one responsible for building up, step by step, transparently evangelical fraternities: 'see how they love one another'; telling each other the story of Jesus Christ in their lives, as a contribution to the edification of all; the demands of contemplative prayer, adoration and joyous community liturgy; great simplicity of life-style; unambiguous apostolic concern for people in situations of distress; a certain flexibility in forms of belonging to the group.

There can be no doubt that in becoming, or re-becoming, what it is, even at the price of some internal tensions, the Holy Ghost Congregation has a future! For the moment it takes shape as a hope and a prayer, which we entrust to the Holy Spirit, to our Blessed Lady's intercession, to the prayers of our founders and of Blessed Fr Laval and Fr Brottier, and of all our fellow-Spiritans who have gone before us in the faith.



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